

**Statement of
Gregory W. Stunz, Ph.D.
Senior Executive Director, Professor, and Endowed Chair
Harte Research Institute
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi**

**Before the
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources
Hearing regarding H.R. 5745, “*Marine Fisheries Habitat Protection Act*”
January 13, 2026**

Chairman Stauber, Ranking Member Ansari and members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss and review scientific discoveries as they relate to the Rigs-to-Reef program and, in general, oil and gas infrastructure and artificial reefs in the Gulf of America. My name is Greg Stunz, and I am the Senior Executive Director at the Harte Research Institute at Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi and hold the academic ranks of Regents Professor, Professor of Marine Biology and Endowed Chair for Fisheries and Ocean Health. A large component of the fisheries research program at our marine science institute involves investigations into artificial reefs, and in particular Rigs-to-Reefs, which represent a dominant structured habitat in the western Gulf, serve as ecological hotspots, and represent important fishing grounds.

Overall, our science, along with the research investigations of many of my colleagues around the Gulf and in other oceans, show that artificial reefs, and especially Rigs-to-Reefs, are of high value in supporting and enhancing our marine fisheries resources, and in particular, Red Snapper and Greater Amberjack. However, our science is simply refining and validating what we have all long-known: structured habitat in an otherwise muddy or featureless bottom enhances fisheries resources. Early fishermen recognized that sunken vessels and a variety of other material on the seafloor are quickly colonized and become flourishing ecosystems. Directed artificial reef construction began during the early 1800s and now has expanded to modern programs across many of the Gulf States and in other national and international waters. Thus, this is not a new concept, but rather how we can use wise scientific practices to inform and maximize the effectiveness of an abundance of reefing opportunities we have with the Rigs-to Reef program.

Our research teams and colleagues involved with habitat restoration science are routinely faced with limited resources, particularly materials/substrate, and the lack of restoration substrate represents a significant bottleneck. However, that is not the case for Rigs-to-Reefs. We have billions in infrastructure readily available in place for reefing, and capitalizing on the existing reefing opportunity provided by these platforms in the Gulf is a win for all parties - an opportunity we should not miss.

Until recently, scientific information that would validate or justify Rigs-to-Reefs programs has been sparse. Over the last 10 years, Congress has appropriated over \$20 million in research funding for three separate studies to better understand habitat use by important federal fisheries in the Gulf and South Atlantic. The central focus of these studies was to understand the habitat use of oil and gas infrastructure by fishes compared to other natural and artificial habitats. Thus, those knowledge gaps are quickly closing, as today’s scientists are equipped with the necessary funding and latest technologies in terms of Remotely Operated Vehicles (ROVs), advanced sonar systems, and other scientific tools. This

new science, grounded in the peer-reviewed literature, is also optimizing best reefing practices such as the appropriate depths to reef, how much relief from the bottom is necessary, and a host of other key factors that can inform managers as to the wise-science behind reefing practices. Overall, the data clearly demonstrates the high ecosystem and economic value of these reefing practices.

We have been surveying reefed platforms in the Gulf since 2012, and our work documents a variety of species inhabiting these structures from small reef fishes to large sharks. Rigs-to-Reefs structures function as recruitment habitat for juvenile fish and are important to a variety of species at different life stages. We have documented an array of economically-important species (snappers, groupers, amberjacks, and many others) residing in Rigs-to-Reefs habitat, highlighting the economic value of these structures to enhance fisheries. Overall, we find that Rigs-to-Reefs structures in our region of the Gulf provide important fisheries habitat in an otherwise structure-poor environment and drive regional economics.

A central question of our research is: “How do these structures perform in relation to Mother Nature, or natural bottom habitat?” I am pleased to report that in every parameter we use to measure success for Rigs-to-Reefs; we see that artificial reefs perform at least as well if not better in all cases. For example, we observe higher densities of fish, faster or similar growth rate, and comparable reproductive output when contrasted to natural bottom. Thus, by all measures, our data demonstrates Rigs-to-Reefs are functioning equivalently, or better, and contribute similarly on a per-capita basis as natural habitat.

No discussion on this topic would be complete without addressing the pervasive Attraction vs. Production argument. The scientific community is well-beyond this debate; nevertheless, the attraction criticism still persists. That being said, do these structures simply attract what is already there versus actually produce new biomass? Attraction is simply the re-distribution of biomass from existing habitat to the artificial reef, while production is an increase in biomass over time. Recent science shows that artificial reefs, including Rigs-to-Reef habitats, function in both attracting and producing new fish biomass. We have discovered this is not an exclusive ‘either-or,’ but a ‘both-and’ situation, where they exist simultaneously in a positive synergistic relationship. Thus, attraction and production are not mutually exclusive as the argument implies, and an artificial reef can serve to attract and produce new fish biomass simultaneously and at varying levels through time. Moreover, our research, and that of others, clearly shows production coming from these structures. However, criticism stems from the assumption that attraction is a negative aspect, when in fact, attraction is actually beneficial, and these artificial habitats would not function if some level of attraction did not exist. Scientific consensus is that both attraction and production are occurring, and both are key parameters for artificial reef performance and function. Moreover, recent research shows that enhanced production stemming from these platforms is greater than in many other marine ecosystems.

The fact that these artificial reefs attract fish is a positive one for the Gulf’s limited supply of hard bottoms because they also attract anglers. Today’s anglers have fast, long-range, boats equipped with remarkable electronic capabilities to locate fish even over the smallest and most remote structures. There are no longer “secret fishing spots” and our entire Exclusive Economic Zone can be easily accessed. The number of such anglers has grown remarkably over the last ten years. With no alternatives to natural more sensitive habitats, anglers will easily (and already are) targeting these natural reefs in large numbers. For example, anglers frequently and routinely make one-way 100-mile day-trips to sensitive areas like the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary. Fortunately,

anglers are most interested in areas that are easy to locate and access. This is exactly what Rigs-to-Reefs provide – a spatial management tool offering anglers high success that is easy to find. These artificial reefs can disperse fishing effort and direct it away from sensitive areas, affording these rare natural habitats, such as the Flower Gardens Banks National Marine Sanctuary, refuge from fishing pressure and damage. Moreover, as the management community considers alternative fisheries management strategies such as depth and regional management, Rigs-to-Reefs show much promise as a remarkably effective management tool in this arena.

There is great need for the practice of converting oil and gas platforms to reefs to be informed and guided by wise-science, and much of that discussion is just beginning. For example, refinement of reefing science and subsequent monitoring to develop the most effective reefing plans will be key information given limited resources and materials. After many workshops and focus groups, the scientific community has coalesced around two key recommendations regarding Rigs-to-Reefs:

1. Enhance fishery resources to the maximum extent practical.
2. Use artificial reefs to minimize conflicts among competing uses for resources in our marine waters.

The most convincing evidence as to the value of Rigs-to-Reefs can be observed firsthand. I recommend diving the High Island 389 platform, the crown jewel of platforms and a Rig-to-Reef. Located in the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary, this platform is one of the most popular dives in the Gulf, often getting more accolades than the astonishing coral banks themselves. Seeing these underwater oases in person, or even the numerous videos available, reveals that these structures are covered in corals and teeming with marine life. Seeing is believing and certainly allays concerns as to whether these structures should be removed from the water. Even some of the industry's staunchest critics are becoming increasingly convinced when reefed properly, these structures serve important ecological functions. Interestingly, divers routinely state this artificial reef dive is the highlight of their trip to the Flower Gardens Sanctuary. Diving there means fewer dives and less pressure on the more sensitive natural reefs reducing pressure on natural hard bottom communities.

In conclusion, Rigs-to-Reefs work and are an effective management tool. From a practical standpoint, and particularly at the federal level, Rigs-to-Reefs is an underutilized option in the fisheries manager's toolbox. They produce fish, reduce pressure on natural systems, and are a wonderful example of the partnership between the oil and gas industry and resource managers, where the Gulf environment, economy, and public all benefit. However, time is not on our side with Rigs-to-Reefs. The decommissioning and removal of what is widely regarded as the largest man-made reef complex in the world is happening at an even more accelerated pace due to regulatory and industrial drivers, and the opportunity to access this habitat resource will not long be available. I encourage Congress and federal agencies to take an active interest to safely ensure as much of this habitat stays in the water as possible. This could be accomplished by codifying the program through the '*Marine Fisheries Habitat Protection Act.*' This bill will facilitate and enhance Rigs to Reef Programs, building on the past and current successes, and this legislation would be bolstered by the latest science discoveries showing the value of this practice.

Thank you for this opportunity to address the Subcommittee, and I will be happy to answer any questions.