

GROUND FISH MANAGEMENT TEAM REPORT ON
ARTIFICIAL REEFS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

The Groundfish Management Team (GMT) reviewed the issue of converting Southern California oil platforms (rigs) to artificial reefs, focusing in on how these reefs might enhance or impact groundfish. While it is noted that these oil platforms do provide habitat and structure for some species of groundfish in the immediate area under and around the rig, there are still questions about the quality of this habitat and how much it contributes to the production and growth of groundfish stocks. Due to the unique environment created by the oil platform, fish densities around these platforms are higher than those observed in adjacent lower relief natural reefs. Fish are attracted to the structure, young recruits congregate within the water column around the reefs, and, because many of these rigs are over 20 years old and act as defacto reserves (fishing is not allowed near the platforms), residential rockfish populations have become established. However, the question of how much of this density of fish is due to reproduction rather than attraction has not been resolved.

Removal of the entire rig will impact the established rockfish populations in the shell mounds under the platforms but if the rigs are converted to artificial reefs, and these reefs become available to fishing, then the populations of groundfish species within these reefs will be impacted. The extent of this impact will depend upon how the harvest rates for these species compare to the production rates, particularly given the relatively small size of these areas. Non-residential species from adjacent waters, moving into the area due to the structure in the water, also will become more vulnerable to fishing around these reefs.

In addition, little information is available on the contaminants (including crude oil) present in the mud discharges around the reef and less is known about the impact of these contaminants on the resident groundfish species.

In light of the above, the GMT recommends that the Council continue to monitor this issue of converting Southern California oil platforms.

PFMC
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