Lloyd Triche, left, and Billy Wurlow of Fina Oil and Gas Co., release two small alligators into the marsh southwest of Falgout Canal Wednesday in Houma.

Oil company lets thousands of gators out

By The Associated Press

HOUMA — An oil company released 427 farm-raised alligators into the southwest Terrebonne Parish marshes Wednesday.

It was the fourth year that Fina Oil and Chemical Co. has released alligators into what the company calls its wetlands mitigation area, which covers 7,200 acres.

This project was started in 1995 when the land rights belonged to Tenneco-LaTerre. The objective was to reconvert the saltwater area back to fresh water. When Fina took over in 1988, the firm continued the project.

This weekend, Fina is expected to release 1,700 more alligators.

Returning farm-raised alligators to the wild is a separate project from the mitigation project, but is only possible because the composition of the marshland has changed.

"We spend $1 million on wetlands," said Rick Hagar, Fina’s public affairs adviser.

Hagar said the company brings in about $500,000 annually from several operations including tourism, the sale of hunting licenses and the sale of alligator eggs.

Fina has another wetlands preservation project in Cameron Parish, south of Lake Charles.

The Fina alligator project is a joint effort with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Alligator eggs are collected from nests in the wild each year and hatched at a commercial farm.

By contrast, the farmers are required to return 17 percent of the alligators to the wild when they are about 48 inches long.

If the average length is smaller, the percentage increases. If the average length is larger, the percentage decreases.

Plaquemine Alligator Farm in Ville Platte buys eggs from Fina. Russell Nelams, who gathers baby alligators at the farm, said the eggs are twice the size of chicken eggs. He said it takes two months for the eggs to hatch.

The alligators received Wednesday averaged 42 inches and 10 to 15 pounds.

Last year, Fina sold 40,000 eggs at an average of $16 per egg.

Rudy Aucoin, a land surveyor for Fina, said the farm-raised alligators usually survive in the wild.

"They have an excellent chance of survival," said Aucoin. "The ones incubated are usually bigger and stronger."

Aucoin said the farm-raised alligators are usually identified by a notch cut in their tails and an identification tag on their hind legs. The tag gives the age, gender and farm the alligator was raised on.

Once the alligators are released in the marshes, they’re on their own.