Pennzoil oil rig sleeps with fish

BATON ROUGE — Like Lucifer Bazi in The Godfather, East Cameron 279-A sleeps with the fishes today.

Lucas Bazi was a Mafia soldier who got in the way. East Cameron was a Pennzoil drilling platform that was no longer needed. But even after being disposed of, the platform is still useful. It is the latest to join the Rigs to Reefs program providing an artificial underwater habitat since it was law in 1985.

"With this program, everybody wins," says Rick Kasprzak, coordinator of the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Artificial Reef Program. "The fish, like red snappers and groupers, are provided a thriving habitat, the state gets half of the money saved in company transportation costs, and the companies save money by eliminating transportation and disposal fees.

Jerry Gilmore, construction engineer advisor for Pennzoil's Gulf of Mexico headquarters in Lafayette, presented Wildlife and Fisheries officials a $177,228 check last week — half of what the company estimates it saved by disposing of the rig on site instead of dismantling it, bringing it onshore and selling it for sale as scrap.

"It was almost a wash," Cameron said, comparing costs of preparing the platform for disposal, transportation cost savings, giving the state half of the transportation savings, and not getting what the company could have been sold the scrap.

Since the production platform had been in place since 1971, "it already has become a thriving habitat for many fish species and underwater organisms," Gilmore said. "We would have deprived the fish of an extremely rich environment if we had dismantled it and moved it onshore."

This was Pennzoil's first Rigs to Reefs project and about the state's 40th. Pennzoil operates 11 major oil and gas production platforms in the Gulf.

A lithe buoy that transmits radio signals marks the site where the soon-to-be reef rests in 170-feet-deep water. The structure, which is lying on its side, reaches upward 95 feet, leaving 80 feet between it and fishing boats that soon will be plotting course to the site 77 miles southeast of the Vermilion Parish jumping-off point, Intracoastal City, State regulations require at least 50-foot clearance.

Besides the busy, Gilmore said the site will appear on maps warning fishermen and shrimpers that the underwater structure is there. Prior to the sinking, the area had a reef-free mud bottom.

Kasprzak said up to 75 percent more fish can be found around oil and gas platforms than surrounding mud bottoms, so if the platform had been taken out, a vital habitat would have been lost.

Pennzoil and other companies can't just sink abandoned equipment. Anything that hasn't been underwater has to be cleansed to Environmental Protection Agency standards. The cost of that often leads to companies disposing of only the underwater jackets and taking the upper structure back to shore.

Pennzoil chose to use all of East Cameron, so everything had to be cleaned. Crews sanitized production equipment and cut hoses in vessels and pipes so it would sink better and so smaller fish would have hiding places, much like natural reefs.

Dismantling the platform took a month in itself. In the meantime, extensive efforts also were made to assure that while providing a habitat for wildlife, none was injured in the process.

This East Cameron 279-A drilling platform represents the first Pennzoil rigs-to-reef project and about the 40th in the state.