Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

July 25, 2012

Secretary Ken Salazar
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240.

Dear Secretary Salazar,

As leaders and members of the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus, we are concerned that the Idle Iron guidance issued by the Department of Interior in October of 2010 is having an adverse impact on critical marine habitat in the Gulf of Mexico. **We request that your Department enact a temporary moratorium on the removal of structures related to that Directive** until a stakeholder process can be developed to determine both the best methods to properly dismantle rigs that have cause to be removed, and to protect those structures that are shown to harbor thriving marine ecosystems.

The factors that may have influenced the decision to order removal of these structures were understandable in the aftermath of the tragic oil spill of 2010, but we believe a moratorium is necessary now to develop a more reasoned response to the issue of idle iron. As currently constructed, the policy stands to inflict sweeping, irreversible damage on an extensive range of marine fisheries and ecosystems. Extensive evidence indicates that these structures are the basis for thriving ecosystems that sustain an immense diversity of life, including seabirds, fish, turtles, marine mammals and corals. Rebuilding and management plans for Gulf reef fish important to recreational anglers and commercial fishermen are predicated on the presence of this artificial habitat. The Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, the body charged with managing marine resources in the federal waters of the Gulf, is currently in the process of declaring rigs and related energy structures as Essential Fish Habitat.

We acknowledge the complex elements involved in developing a comprehensive policy to deal with idle iron. We agree that all abandoned wells should be plugged and secured to eliminate any future risks. Some structures may have associated environmental hazards that should be removed and the surrounding area remediated as soon as possible. The liability and navigational issues are formidable and maintenance costs going forward are a concern. However, the fact that many of these structures now provide ecological benefits that far outweigh the benefits of removal should compel us to engage stakeholders and develop rational criteria to protect them wherever possible.

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Leading conservation and angler groups such as Coastal Conservation Association, American Sportfishing Association, International Game Fish Association, National Marine Manufacturers Association, The Billfish Foundation, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation and Center for Coastal Conservation have made the protection of these man-made reefs a top priority. We urge you to use this opportunity to declare a moratorium, engage stakeholders and develop more thoughtful methods to achieve our shared goal of protecting and enhancing our marine environment.

Sincerely,

Representative Steven Palazzo

Representative Jeff Miller

Representative Mike Ross

Representative Alan Nunnelee

Representative Bennie Thompson

Representative Chip Cravaack

Representative Walter Jones

Representative Gene Green

Representative Steve Southerland

Representative Robert Latta

Representative Blake Farenthold

Representative Heath Shuler

Representative Howard Coble

Representative Rich Nugent

Representative John Kline

Representative Michael Conaway

Representative Gus Bilirakis

Representative Adam Kinzinger

Representative Cedric Richmond

Representative Leonard Boswell