

# Fishing and Offshore Drilling Coexist Peacefully

By Ronald C. Lassiter, President, Zapata Corp.

Few ocean-related issues have stirred more controversy than the federal government's decision to seek oil and gas leases on the Georges Bank, offshore Massachusetts. Environmentalists and some fishing interests protested that exploration and development would imperil fish harvests from the 20,000-sq. mile area, 80 miles east of Cape Cod. Energy developers disagreed.

That argument is mostly behind us now, and oil and gas exploration is slated to begin later this year, but the Georges Bank debate provides a microcosm of the concerns that separate environmentalists and developers in many areas, including Alaska.

Much of this debate is more fiction than function; neither side seems to want to take the time to understand the other's position. That is sad because I firmly believe offshore drilling and fishing can coexist peace-

fully and productively.

I make that statement with conviction because I am president of a unique company that is a major offshore drilling contractor and also has extensive commercial fishing operations. Offshore oil and gas exploration and fishing are both maritime operations that share common problems and require similar expertise. Our experience definitively has demonstrated that the two industries are compatible.

The conclusion is supported by a report compiled by Rice University. Called the "Offshore Econology Investigation," the nearly 600-page document is one of the most complete studies of the effects of oil drilling and production on the coastal environment. According to the report, natural changes in the marine ecosystem cause greater effects over time than oil drilling or production.

Consider the situation in the Gulf of Mexico. During the past

25 years, offshore drilling has grown from nothing to extremely heavy development in some areas, especially offshore Louisiana where more than 3,000 structures are located today.

During this period, we have seen consistent increases in the menhaden harvest in the area, growing from 213,000 metric tons in 1955 to 820,000 metric tons in 1978. This fact is of key importance because menhaden is a delicate species, as are shrimp and other shellfish, and depends on a clean estuarine system for survival.

Given these facts one has to conclude that, at a minimum, the presence of rigs has not been detrimental to the fishing industry.

An important reason why the petroleum and commercial fishing industries have been able to coexist peacefully is because both have matured in recent years. The petroleum industry has discovered that fishermen

are good marine neighbors and has become much more careful to keep the ocean environment clean.

Fishermen, on the other hand, have enjoyed many benefits from the presence of the petroleum industry, including improved ports and harbors, better vessel repair facilities and stronger local economies.

One recurring concern of the fishing industry boils down to competition for physical space in offshore areas. Many times, it is assumed that thousands of platforms will suddenly dot the offshore horizon, constituting a navigational hazard.

That is simply not going to happen on the Georges Bank. A 1976 study by the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, estimates that, at most, platforms would pre-empt some 62 sq. miles of the bank.

Another concern voiced is whether the drilling process

(Continued on Page 4A)

## Fishing and Drilling

(Continued from Page 1A)

clouds the water with sediments. The answer is "yes," but the situation is temporary and to be honest is not really much of a problem.

By any measure the mud discharge from drilling operations is only a fraction of the amount discharged into the water by natural resources such as rivers and storms. The Mississippi River alone carries nearly 400 million tons of mud and sediments into the Gulf every year.

The hottest issue concerned with offshore exploration is oil spills. It is not my intention to brush aside the awful reality of an oil spill. Oil spills are disasters, but they are not catastrophes of the magnitude or frequency popularly believed.

During the last 30 years, approximately 25,000 wells have been drilled in U.S. waters. Yet there has been only one major U.S. spill that reached the shoreline in any significant amount. That was in the Santa Barbara Channel, however, no permanent damage resulted.

The largest oil spill in recent years was from the Ixtoc 1 well in Mexico's Bay of Campeche. That spill reached as far as Padre Island in southern Texas. Testimony before the United States Senate last December showed that the Campeche spill could have been avoided if modern technology had been used.

Obviously, I am not advocating unrestrained spilling of oil into the oceans, but I am suggesting that the oceans of the world have an immense and vastly underestimated capacity for regeneration. Natural processes, such as oil seeps, release many times the amount of pollutants into the marine environment as oil operations, yet the oceans survive without notice-

able change.

A 1976 study by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration states that 1.3 percent of all petroleum hydrocarbons entering the marine environment are due to offshore production. Nearly 10 percent came from natural seeps. Some 26 percent came from river runoff. The single largest contributor of marine petroleum hydrocarbons - nearly 35 percent - is marine transportation.

Oil and gas development and the promotion and preservation of fishing can exist as good neighbors, both doing their part to meet vital national needs. We need only have the vision and understanding to make it happen.

economically sound venture.

Let's all hope that their study results are positive and that Alaska is fortunate enough to obtain a petrochemical complex.