

Should they stay or should they go?

With a growing number of offshore man-made structures reaching the end of their lives, could scientific evidence hold the key to the decommissioning debate?

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Giant offshore structures retire, but what happens next? Credit: Siemens AG, Munich/Berlin (www.siemens.com/press)

In places like the North Sea we are entering a legacy era for the offshore oil and gas industry. As operations ramp down, could scientific evidence hold the key to reducing economic cost and environmental impact of full decommissioning? The European Marine Board thinks so. A new Policy Brief highlights the scientific questions that now need to be answered to settle the debate on what should be done with these structures.

“Scientific research offers a significant opportunity to provide evidence in assessing potential impacts and determining good practice for the decommissioning of offshore installations” says Niall McDonough, Executive Director, European Marine Board.

Recent estimates suggest that there are currently around 1,350 oil and gas installations in the North Sea and North Atlantic regions and 1,800 offshore wind turbines in North Sea region alone. And this number is rising. The total cost of full decommissioning of oil and gas installations in the North Sea for the period 2015 to 2040 is estimated at between US\$70 and US\$82 billion¹. The numbers of installations requiring decommissioning is also set to increase dramatically as renewable energy devices reach the end of their operational life². Indeed, with the future of energy in Europe moving more and more towards renewable sources, proposed projects like the North Sea Wind Power Hub³ suggest that a vast number of new structures could be installed in the marine environment in the near future. Globally, the energy industry and governments are examining different decommissioning approaches, from full removal to the production of artificial reefs.

The INSITE⁴ programme, a unique collaboration between industry and research institutions, is already exploring the influence of man-made structures on the marine ecosystem in order to provide a solid scientific basis for future decision-making.

“Scientific evidence helps us develop best practice that mutually benefits industry, governments, research and global marine ecosystems” explains Jan de Leeuw, a scientist at Royal Netherlands Institute for Sea Research (NIOZ) and a member of the INSITE Scientific Advisory Board.

¹ <https://www.spe.org/en/print-article/?art=4>

² The world's first offshore wind farm, “Vindeby” off South East Denmark, reached decommissioning age earlier this year.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Sea_Wind_Power_Hub

⁴ www.insitenorthsea.org

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Ultimately, appropriate decisions need to be made in the very near future regarding the decommissioning of oil and gas and renewable energy structures. So should they stay or should they go? That is a question that science can help answer.

You can find out more on our website: www.marineboard.eu

Notes to editors

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The European Marine Board (EMB) is a leading European think tank in marine science policy. EMB is a network with a membership comprising major national marine/oceanographic institutes, research funding agencies and national networks of universities from countries across Europe. The Board provides a platform for its member organizations to develop common priorities, to advance marine research, and to bridge the gap between science and policy to meet future marine science challenges and opportunities.

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