

Some N.E. fish species on slow road to recovery

■ Despite days-at-sea cuts, overfishing still exists, and critics say regulators are failing to boost stocks.

By **DOUG FRASER**
STAFF WRITER

It's been a dozen years since federal fishery managers closed down thousands of square miles of prime fishing grounds and slashed the number of fishing days in half after many of New England's signature stocks of fish crashed to historic low population levels.

Leading up to 1994, regulators had struggled for decades to get a grip on overfishing that annually removed more than 60 percent of adult fish from some stocks. Too few fish remained each year to replenish those taken the year before and stocks were in a death spiral.

The intervening years have seen a succession of increasingly harsher fishery regulations, including reductions in fishing days to around 30 days, and extensive

additional fishing area closures every year that, at times, shut down most of New England waters.

New measures under consideration, and expected to be in effect in September, would effectively cut that number of days in half for most fishermen.

While some stocks such as haddock and witch flounder are now on the road to recovery, 12 of 19 of the bottom-feeding fish species managed together as groundfish have shown little or no improvement since 1994, according to a federal stock assessment report issued in January. In each of those struggling stocks, the one common factor is the failure of fishery management to stop overfishing, the report says.

The result, say critics, is a system in which fishermen are asked to make a living on a handful of fishing days that is cut each year with little progress in stock rebuilding.

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PRISCILLA BROOKS
Director of the Conservation Law Foundation's Healthy Oceans Program

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Fish stocks: Not all species rebounding

In 1994, many of the groundfish stocks hit historic lows and deep cuts in fishing days were implemented in order to allow them to rebuild. Large areas of the ocean also were closed to fishing. Nineteen fish stocks and their status are listed below and categorized according to population statistics between 1994 and 2005.

DOWN ▼

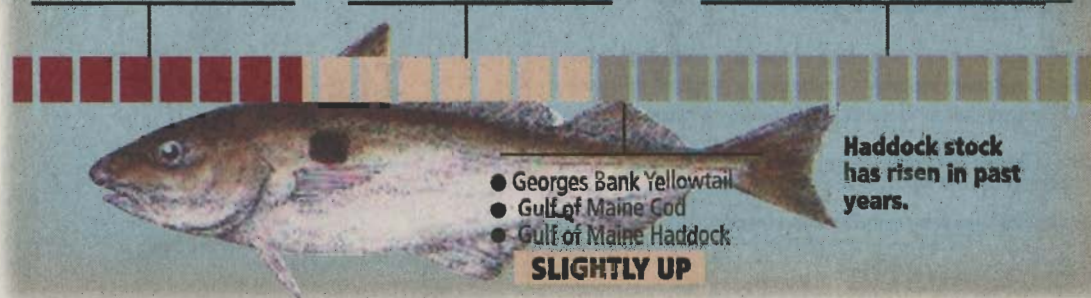
- Cape Cod Gulf of Maine Yellowtail
- Ocean Pout
- Gulf of Maine Georges Bank Windowpane Flounder
- Southern New England Mid-Atlantic Bight Windowpane Flounder

FLAT —

- George's Bank Cod
- Southern New England Mid-Atlantic Yellowtail
- Gulf of Maine/ Georges Bank American Plaice
- Southern New England Mid-Atlantic Winter Flounder
- Atlantic Halibut

UP ▲

- Georges Bank Haddock
- Witch Flounder
- Gulf of Maine Winter Flounder
- Georges Bank Winter Flounder
- Gulf of Maine Georges Bank White Hake
- Georges Bank Gulf of Maine Pollock
- Gulf of Maine Georges Bank Acadian Redfish



SOURCES: National Marine Fisheries Service and New England Fishery Management Council

Fish: Not all species making a comeback

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able," said Priscilla Brooks, director of the Conservation Law Foundation's Healthy Oceans Program.

Peter Baker, campaign director for the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, agreed that cutting the number of fishing days every year in the hope of ending overfishing hasn't worked.

"Days-at-sea cuts have been tried for a decade or more, and the result is we have less fish, less fishermen, less revenues," he said. Baker said there were 176 hook fishermen catching cod on Georges Bank in the mid-1990s. Today, there are less than 50.

Baker called for more federal money to be invested in restoring fisheries by funding research and independent fishery observers who ride along with fishermen and take count of what they catch and throw away.

More importantly, he said, fisheries managers must end overfishing by utilizing a system that shuts down fisheries automatically when a pre-determined amount of fish is caught instead of cutting fishing days, in the hope that will stop fishermen from catching too many fish.

On the road to recovery?

New England is not unique in having fishery management problems, say environmentalists.

Last week, the Marine Fish Conservation Network, a national coalition of 175 environmental groups, commercial and recreational fishing organizations, and science organizations, released a report charging the National Marine Fisheries Service and the regional fishery management councils with mismanaging the U.S. fishery and attempting to disguise the lack of progress in rebuilding fish stocks.

The report says that only 13 percent of the nation's fish stocks could be considered "healthy."

Healthy stocks were defined as those where the population was high enough to sustain commercial fishing and that fishermen were not currently catching more fish than the stock could replace through reproduction.

The report blamed the unwillingness of fishery managers to end overfishing, a reluctance to follow scientific advice and aversion for tools such as closed areas and fishing moratoriums to rebuild stocks.

"We can rebuild (fish stocks) while overfishing is occurring because unfettered, massive overfishing is not occurring," countered Susan Buchanan, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries spokesperson. NOAA Fisheries has oversight over the National Marine Fisheries Service, which, in turn, works with regional fishery management councils who vote on fishery policy for each region of the country.

Buchanan said reversing decades of overfishing and bringing back hundreds of depleted stocks takes time. She said it also involves more than fishery management plans. It takes the right combination of nature and luck to get a species on the road to recovery.

Long-term outlook

Steven Correia, a fishery sci-

entist with the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, thinks environmentalists are oversimplifying the problem when they criticize fishery management solely on the basis of whether regulators have ended overfishing.

"People need to take the long-term look," he said. Correia added fishermen in New England are catching, on average, half the percentage of each year's adult fish population, compared with a decade ago.

Correia said even if fishing mortality rates in New England haven't been brought down to levels where stocks will rebuild, they have been reduced enough to produce a bumper crop of fish. The problem for some of New England's signature species, such as Georges Bank cod, is those bumper crops of fish are long overdue.

Still, Correia and others are leery of shutting down all fishing to bring stocks back. "You could shut off fishing and the stocks would rebuild, but you'd wipe out industry and shoreside infrastructure (fishing piers, processing plants, ice houses and access to markets), with no economic benefits coming out of (a rebuilt fishery)," he said.

"This is where the challenge lies," said Brooks. "If you don't do enough to trigger rebuilding, you're not helping the fishing industry either."

There is a cost to delaying

rebuilding. Former NMFS Northeast regional administrator Andrew Rosenberg recently completed a study showing that for every year or two you delay rebuilding, you add five years to the time required for most stocks to rebuild.

Although Georges Bank cod was declared overfished in 1994, it took seven more years for NMFS and the New England Fishery Management Council to set the rebuilding time. In 1996, Congress required that most stocks must be rebuilt within 10 years of being declared overfished, but Georges Bank cod's target date is 2026. Gulf of Maine cod is in a similar situation, where it took four years to set the rebuilding schedule, with 2014 as the target date.

Balancing act

A recent study by University of British Columbia economists Ussif Rashid Sumaila and Lisa Suatoni found \$765 million more in additional revenues from commercial and recreational catches of 15 fish species nationwide once they are rebuilt. New England fishermen would see \$205 million more from just cod alone once they return to healthy levels.

Cape Cod fishermen have seen their groundfish revenues drop from \$8.1 million in 2001 to \$3.7 million in 2004.

Rosenberg has sympathy for the fishery management councils and for NMFS. "They can only do what the political system allows them to do," he said. He said the councils and NMFS have a tough job balancing the need to rebuild fish stocks with complaints from fishermen, pleas from politicians, and litigation from all sides.

Rosenberg said there are still far too many boats catching too few fish in New England to rely primarily on cutting fishing days. He believes catch limits that shut down fishing immediately were the only way to ensure rebuilding of stocks.

Many believe New England will eventually see fish quotas divided up and portioned out to fishing groups to manage themselves. That's already happened here with the Cape hook fishermen's association and the Cape gillnet association, each receiving a portion of the annual cod quota. In exchange, they submitted their own plans detailing how they would stay within their quota, how they will stop fishing when that limit is reached, and how they will police themselves and meet fishery requirements.

These are fishermen who are taking on the hard work of the council and NMFS themselves.

"Your dream as a manager is to say, 'Here's the limit (of what you can catch). You can leave the dock when you have a plan that accomplishes that,'" said Rosenberg.

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Rebuilding the stocks

In 1995, many fish species were dependent on fish spawning once before they were caught. With fewer adult fish being taken now, more survive to spawn repeatedly. Studies have shown that older, larger fish produce more eggs, and that eggs from older fish tend to have higher survivability rates.

The unknown in this equation is the environmental conditions at the critical time after larvae have hatched. Winds can blow larvae away from areas where there is food and shelter, or predators can wipe out large contingents. Fish that are born each year are identified by scientists by their year/class, much like this year's high school graduates will be known as the Class of 2006. The benefit of having fish populations with widespread ages is that you're not putting all your eggs in one basket. In a fishery, such as cod in the 1990s, where all the older fish are caught and most fish only get one chance to spawn before being caught, a bad spawning year reverberates for many years to come. When a year/class has fewer individuals from the start, they mathematically have a much slimmer chance of producing a bigger crop of fish when they reach spawning age.

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STEVEN CORREIA

Scientist with the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries