The bounty of New England’s fisheries once fed a growing nation, fueled a regional economy, and supported generations of families.

By the early 1990s, most of New England’s iconic groundfish stocks, such as cod, haddock, and flounder had collapsed as a result of excessive catch levels, increasingly efficient fleets, and a historical reluctance to take the necessary steps to sustain and rebuild fish populations.

It was New England’s fisheries crisis that largely motivated Congress in 1996 to amend the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the federal fisheries law, to require that overfished fish stocks be rebuilt in as short of time period as possible, not to exceed ten years (with certain exceptions). These requirements have since been applied in New England more than any other region, and more than half of the region’s once-overfished stocks have been rebuilt or are making significant progress under rebuilding plans implemented to meet the requirements.

Nine stocks, including sea scallops and Georges Bank haddock, have been rebuilt under the 1996 amendments. Two more have made significant progress since rebuilding began, reaching at least 50 percent of the rebuilding target and a 25 percent increase in abundance. On the other hand, three stocks, including the Cape Cod/Gulf of Maine and Georges Bank yellowtail flounder stocks, have made only limited rebuilding progress (reaching at least 50 percent of the rebuilding target or a 25 percent increase in abundance). The Gulf of Maine haddock stock was rebuilt but has since declined significantly. Six stocks, including both of the region’s cod stocks, have shown a lack of rebuilding progress. With continued overfishing the likely culprit of rebuilding shortfalls in most instances, it is hoped that recently implemented annual catch limits in the region will turn the corner for these stocks.

A FISHERMAN’S PERSPECTIVE:

As a former chair of the New England Fishery Management Council, John Pappalardo heard many times how someone needed to catch more fish to cover a mortgage or pay college tuition. These are real problems brought on by depleted fish populations.

But simply forestalling quota cuts is not going to rectify the situation, and given the fact that fishermen can’t find fish to catch, the economic damage is already being done.

“I think we’ll be lucky this year to catch 50 percent of the cod quota we’re allowed to catch,” said Pappalardo, CEO of the Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fishermen’s Association. “We are at a point right now where there are some pretty deep concerns that those fish are gone.”

Many fishermen, always resourceful, feel that the groundfish crisis is recoverable. In 1994, we were in a similar circumstance with sea scallops. There were few scallops left and scallop businesses were scarcely profitable.

And now, the scallop fishery is one of the most valuable in the nation. If we could turn around the scallop fishery, then we can do the same for groundfish.

“There’s a long history here of taking a lot of fish and kicking the can down the road,” he said. “The evidence is in, and we need to maintain a framework for setting goals and measuring success in rebuilding our stocks with the full participation of fishermen.”