

# Maine's groundfishing industry is in decline. Saving it is complicated.

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March 2, 2025



Ralph Ferrante tends the hatch as fish are offloaded from the fishing boat Brittany Lynn at Portland Fish Exchange. *Derek Davis/Portland Press Herald*

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On Randy Cushman's final fishing trip, he looked out at the sea and said, "thank you."

"It's been quite a ride," he told the fierce winter wind and the churning waves and the fish beneath them.

The 63-year-old is a fifth-generation fisherman. He went out on his first fishing trip with his dad at age 5. By the time he was 20, he was captaining a boat out of Port Clyde.

Now, after more than four decades as a groundfisherman, Cushman is preparing to sell his boat and is looking for a new job. He's applied for positions at Walmart, the YMCA and car dealerships.

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“In a lot of ways, I feel like I died,” he said. “But you can’t keep doing it just to do it. I couldn’t do it anymore.”

Cushman isn’t the only one throwing in the towel. According to the Maine Coast Fishermen’s Association, there were more than 300 boat operators catching cod, haddock, pollock, halibut and flounder for a living in the early 1990s. In 2024, there were around 30.

Once a major economic engine of Maine’s coastal region, the groundfishing industry is disappearing. At grocery stores and markets across Maine, it’s often easier to find cod caught in the Norwegian Sea than in the Gulf of Maine.

Fishermen, scientists and advocates chalk the sharp decline up to a tangle of issues: unstable markets, regulatory changes, outdated science, competition with countries like Iceland and Norway and depleting fish stocks.

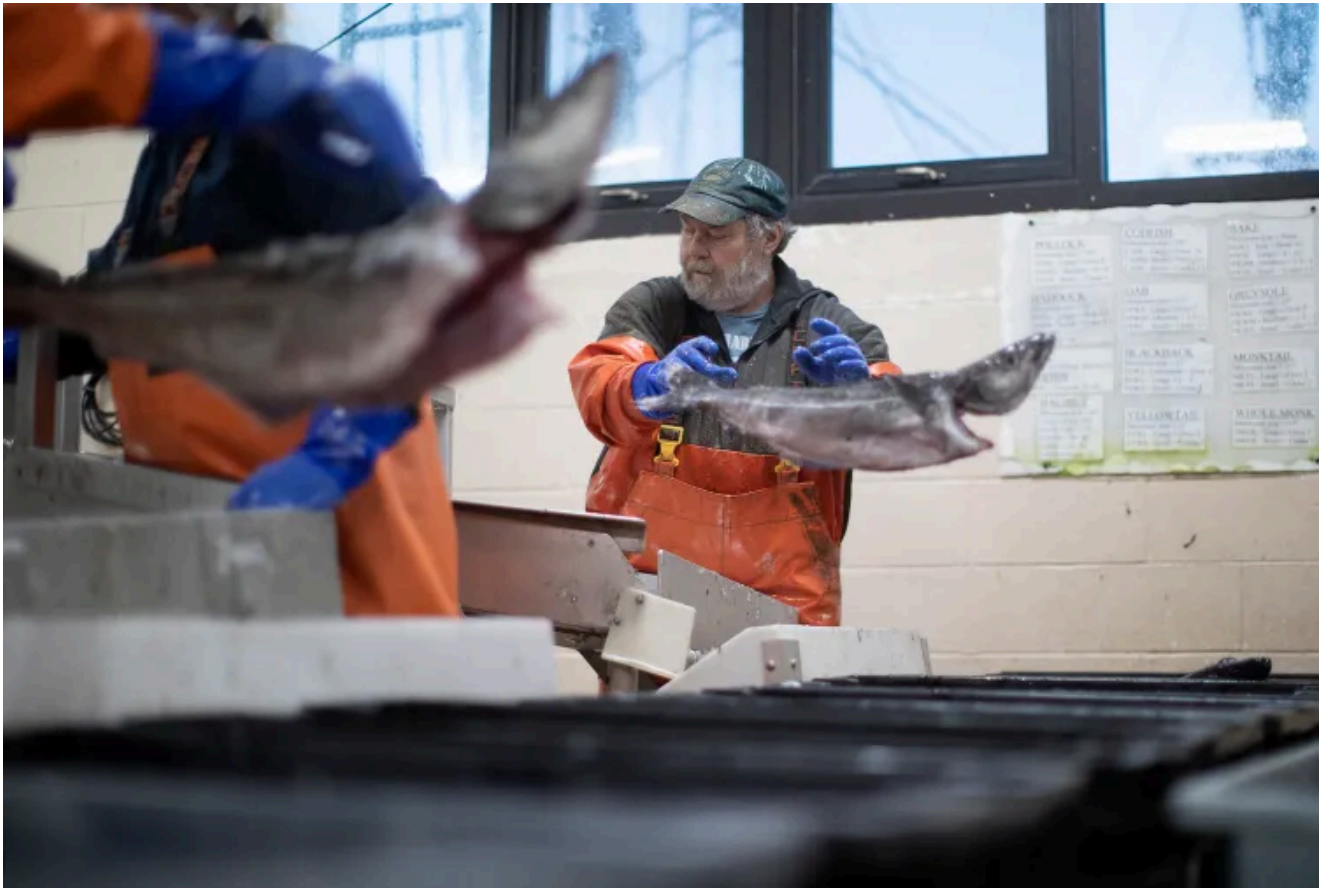
Young people from groundfishing families like Cushman’s are going into lobstering and scalloping. Old-timers are selling their boats. Scientists and fishermen alike say that without some big changes, the industry may not survive in Maine.

## **REGULATORY CHANGES**

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Groundfishing has been part of Maine’s economy since the 1600s. It targets fish swimming close to the bottom of the ocean, including cod, haddock, pollock, halibut and flounder.

For centuries, Mainers were able to make a good living in groundfishing. But in the early 2000s, the industry went through a big change when it became clear that fish populations could collapse without stricter regulations.



Dave Townsend sorts fish at Portland Fish Exchange. *Derek Davis/Portland Press Herald*  
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Since the 1970s, when the Magnuson-Stevens Act imposed regulations on fisheries nationwide, groundfishermen have operated on a “days at sea” system. The system allowed a fixed number of days of fishing per year for permit holders, and for each of those days it set a limit on how many pounds of each fish stock could be harvested.

Scientists and fishermen both said they saw declining fish populations at the turn of the century.

“We needed to do something,” Cushman said. “The resource was depleting, and it wasn’t pretty. A lot of the species were hurting.”

Under this system, fishermen would reach their quota on one stock but keep fishing for others. But because different species share habitats, it was impossible to completely avoid fish they didn’t aim to catch. Fishermen would end up pulling in fish for stocks they’d already maxed out.

There were no rules against discarding extra fish back then, but there were fines imposed if fishermen brought back more than they were allowed for some species. The result was thousands of pounds of dead fish thrown back in the ocean.

In 2010, the system changed. Instead of a days at sea system, a quota system was implemented. Discarding fish is no longer allowed, and fines are imposed for bringing back too many fish. Limits for fish stocks are set for the year rather than for the day, but fishermen can go out as many days as they want until they hit the quota for one stock. Once one stock is maxed out, they're done fishing for the season.

## THE BEST AVAILABLE SCIENCE

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Jonathan Labaree, chief community officer at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, said that under the existing regulatory system, only about 20% of what's permitted is actually being caught.

The new system created "choke species." Those are the species with the lowest quotas that effectively stop fishermen from catching as many pounds of other species as they are allowed. Quotas for each stock change year to year based on surveying data collected by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

"Half of what fishing is now is avoiding catching what you don't want to catch," said Geordie King, 64. He's been a groundfisherman in Maine since the 1980s.



Geordie King has been a commercial fisherman for over 40 years. *Derek Davis/Portland Press Herald*  
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King said he believes in regulating fishing, but he's concerned that the data scientists use to inform quotas isn't reliable.

"There is a big disparity between what scientists are seeing and what we're seeing," King said. "And we're out there every day. These guys are just surveying a handful of days a year."

In 2024, for example, the total allowable catch limit for cod was set relatively low, because surveying data showed the species declining. But King said he couldn't get away from cod out at sea.

Other fishermen interviewed for this story said they experienced the same thing: data showing that a species was dangerously overfished, leading to low quotas, but out on the ocean, that fish would seem to be everywhere.

"The regulatory system requires us to use the best available science, but best available doesn't always mean good," said Ben Martens, executive director of the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association.

## **CONCERNED SCIENTISTS**

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Scientists agree that existing data collection methods are less than ideal.

Graham Sherwood, a senior research scientist in fisheries at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute said that one explanation for the disconnect between what the science shows and what fishermen see can be explained by data collection methods developed when there were more fish in the ocean.

Fish will probably never be as abundant in the Gulf of Maine as they were a hundred years ago, Sherwood said. But, he said, the population could still stabilize at lower levels. Surveys are predicated on random sampling, which means scientists don't go looking for the best fish habitat in the ocean when measuring fish populations. Instead they randomly drop trawls around the Gulf to collect data.





Ralph Ferrante tends the hatch as fish are offloaded from the fishing boat Brittany Lynn at Portland Fish Exchange. *Derek Davis/Portland Press Herald*  
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Sherwood said that's all well and good when fish are thriving, but when they're at lower levels, fish congregate near their best habitats. So there might be hundreds of thousands of cod all in one small area where the habitat is ideal. Fishermen know to look for cod there. But if scientists don't take samples from that particular spot where the cod gather, their data might show that cod are nearly extinct, when the truth could be that they are stable but less abundant than they were 50 years ago — or somewhere in the middle.

"Fishermen are in the business of finding fish," Sherwood said. "So if there are spots where all the fish are ... fishermen are going to spend all their effort finding those habitats and fishing there. If you are doing a survey, you're putting a trawl here and here and here, but you could be missing the habitats."

With random sampling, years of data could indicate that a species is nearly extinct, and then, if scientists happen to drop a trawl in an ideal habitat, the data could show the species has abruptly rebounded.

The less-than-perfect science means that fish quotas can fluctuate dramatically and unpredictably year to year and don't reflect what's really happening in the ocean.

## UNSTABLE MARKETS

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These constantly changing quotas create a difficult market for fish buyers and sellers alike.

Mary Hudson, director of fisheries programs at the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association, said drastic quota changes each year have created an inconsistent product in Maine's fish markets, leaving buyers going elsewhere for products.



Georgie King watches as fish are offloaded from his boat at Portland Fish Exchange. *Derek Davis/Portland Press Herald*

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"If you have a strong market for a fish, and suddenly there is a huge cut in what they're allowed to catch, you lose that market very quickly. Buyers are going to find other things, and once they leave, it's hard to get them back," Hudson said.

The fluctuating regulations have been accompanied by a steep decline in Maine's groundfishing fleet. NOAA reported that in 2009 there were 60 boats consistently landing groundfish in Maine; in 2023 there were 31.

Because it's unpredictable which species will be available on the market year to year, Hudson said fish buyers and processors have been reluctant to invest in modern equipment to process and package fish.

Meanwhile, Icelandic and Norwegian fishermen have invested in modern boats with machines that cut and package the fish on board.

“As a region, compared to the rest of the world, we are very behind with our technology for processing fish,” Hudson said.

With fish buyers often looking to other countries, Maine fishermen are left with little security that they can sell their products for a good price. Hudson said prices can swing by as much as \$4 per pound day to day for the same species. Hudson said she saw pollock selling for \$4 per pound this summer, but this winter it was selling for about 44 cents.

Justin “Buzz” Libby, a groundfisherman out of Port Clyde, lands about 5,000 to 10,000 pounds of fish per trip. After the cost of food, fuel and paying his crew, he can bring back anywhere from \$6,000 to \$35,000 per trip, with a sizeable portion of that ultimately going to boat maintenance. He takes about 40 trips a year. Other fishermen reported losing several thousand dollars on some trips.

“We’re getting the same prices as we were in the ’90s when I went with my father — nothing else is the same price as it was in the ’90s,” Libby said.

“These fishermen are making pennies. I don’t know why they’re still fishing, to be honest,” Hudson said.

For Cushman, this was enough to push him out of the industry. He made it through the big regulatory overhaul in 2010, but with the pandemic, he saw the market take another hit. For years, restaurants had been some of the few reliable buyers he could count on. But when many of them shuttered in 2020 and inflation soared, making it more expensive for him to maintain his boat and pay crew, he couldn’t break even anymore.





Unstable markets, regulatory changes, outdated science and competition with other countries have contributed to the decline of Maine's groundfishing industry. *Derek Davis/Portland Press Herald*  
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Martens said the value of groundfish is down 73% from 2019. A big part of that decline, he said, comes from landed fish not selling at all. That means fishermen are often in the red for their trips out to sea.

"I got so discouraged, I stopped adding up what I was averaging per year. The last four years we haven't made enough money to get the boat prepared for the following season," Cushman said. "With the pandemic, it was like boom! One day you're making a living and then you aren't."

## **'I CAN CATCH WHAT I WANT TO CATCH'**

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Over the last decade and a half, many groundfishermen have left the industry in favor of lobstering, including Randy Cushman's younger brother, Gerry Cushman. He sold his fishing boat in 2010 when the quota system was implemented. He said with lobstering, unlike groundfishing, he can reliably sell his catch for a decent price.

"The price of lobster is more consistent and I can catch what I want to catch," Gerry Cushman said.

In 2024, lobstermen sold their catch for an average of \$6.14 per pound, according to the state Department of Marine Resources.

Sherwood, the scientist with the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, said that the declining populations of groundfish in the early 2000s may have helped lobsters thrive. That's because lobsters are prey for some groundfish species, including cod.

"You don't even need to have predation to have an impact. If a cod is in the vicinity of the lobster, the lobster will hide. But if you remove the cod, lobsters will go everywhere and roam without any fear. They are more productive and travel further," Sherwood said.

Whatever is happening ecologically, the lobster market remains more stable than the groundfish market. In part, that can be attributed to a more consistent product and better marketing, Hudson said.

"The state is really good at marketing lobster, but groundfish gets pushed to the side," Hudson said.

## **LOOKING AHEAD WITH HOPE**

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Now that Randy Cushman has stopped fishing, Libby is the only groundfisherman left in Port Clyde.

The 44-year-old, like Cushman, came from a fishing family. Growing up, he never doubted that he could make a living as a groundfisherman. He remembers when he got started as a teenager that a couple dozen boats would head out to sea alongside him. Now he's alone.

"I spend the majority of the time on the water now by myself. We used to network, we used to chit chat and talk about how other folks did. But now it's just me. It's strange," Libby said.

He's not immune to the challenges that have pushed other fishermen from the industry. The only way he was able to stay afloat, he said, was by taking on some extra work scalloping down in New Bedford. But still, Libby has hope.



Ralph Ferrante tends the hatch as fish are offloaded from the fishing boat Brittany Lynn at Portland Fish Exchange. *Derek Davis/Portland Press Herald*  
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He sees species rebounding and believes there's a way to fish consistently while also allowing for stable fish stocks. And he has faith that markets could get better, in part due to efforts by the Maine Coast Fishermen's Association to draw more buyers to groundfish. The organization purchased a million pounds of local groundfish between October 2020 and July 2024 to be processed and served in Maine's schools and at food banks for their Fisherman Feeding Mainers program.

There are new nets that are becoming more common, which allow fishermen to avoid certain species while catching others. They could lessen the impact of choke species on the industry.

But Libby worries some of these changes have come too late. He isn't sure how much of the industry is left to save. He isn't planning to go anywhere, though.

"At the end of the day, you're feeding people, and that's pretty cool — you're nourishing people," Libby said.

It's the same thing Cushman loved about it: the fish.

“That’s one of the biggest things I’m really going to miss — the fish I ate off my boat,” Cushman said. “I’m going to buy local, of course, but nothing beats catching it and putting it in the pan when it’s just a few hours old.”

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