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Two Maine nonprofits today announced a new program designed to rebuild fish stocks and help put fishermen back to work at the same time. The details of the so-called "permit bank" are still being worked out, but the plan is to make new permits available to at least half a dozen fisherman in midcoast and eastern Maine in exchange for their on-the-water research.



The Permit Bank is designed to preserve two disappearing species in the area that stretches from the Penobscot Bay Islands east to Canada: groundfish, such as cod, hake and flounder, and those who catch them.

"That area has 150 miles of coast as the crow flies, 50 fishing communities, over three thousand lobster licenses and no one going groundfishing anymore," says Robin Alden, Director of the Penobscot East Resource Center, which has teamed up with The Nature Conservancy of Maine and purchased a federal groundfish permit to be used by local hook fishermen who have relinquished or never had a permit.

The resource center plans to lease fishing rights from the permit to fishermen using habitat-friendly hook gear to catch fish sustainably, on a small scale. "So why did we buy a groundfish permit? We did it because we at Penobscot East, and all of the fisherman that we've been working with over the last six years, see it as the only hope to both rebuild the fish stocks themselves and rebuild the fishery for them," Alden says.

Groundfish stocks started to decline decades ago and virtually collapsed almost 15 years ago. They haven't rebounded the way fish in the southern Gulf of Maine or other parts of New England have.

"We brought in about three-quarters of a million pounds of fish each summer. We thought there was no limit to the fish out there," says Richard Bridges, a 64-year-old former groundfisherman-turned-lobsterman, a common career change for fisherman in his town of Stonington.

Bridges says he and a friend hope to participate in the Permit Bank program to teach younger fisherman how to groundfish. "I really don't want it for myself but I would like to work on the very beginning of it because I'm one that's been hooking - Ted Ames and myself have been hooking and the only ones left I guess - and would like to show these younger fellas what we knew. Most of the younger guys don't even have a clue about hooks or anything. All they know is lobster."

Under the current system, fisherman can buy and sell federal fishing permits that allow them to fish off the coast of New England. When the fishing populations declined, most eastern Maine fishermen sold their permits or stopped fishing all together. Many permits were sold out of state.

The goal of the Penobscot East Resource Center and The Nature Conservancy is to keep permits in the state as fish populations rebound. Other Permit Banks have also been set up recently by the Island Institute in Rockland and the state Department of Marine Resources.

These are Maine's first permit-banking programs, and the concept is still being tested in other parts of the country, says Robin Alden of the Penobscot East Resource Center.

"There are several other permit banks in New England. Gloucester is the notable one. The Cape Cod Commercial Hook Fisherman's Association is starting a permit bank in Chatham, Massachusetts, on the Cape. All of this is in its very most formative stage and so we're working with both of those other groups to look at the types of regulatory changes that are going to make it possible to operate these in the future," Alden says.

A permit costs between hundreds of thousands of dollars, Alden says. The two groups fundraised, then purchased theirs from retired fisherman Victor Levesque of Mount Desert Island