When natural gas began flowing from the Lower Mobile Bay — Mary Ann Field in 1988, it culminated years of work to bring Alabama’s first offshore field on line. It also signified an important beginning — the initial production of a resource vital to the state’s economy, from an area described as one of the most important natural gas-producing regions discovered in the 48 contiguous states over the past 20 years.

Mobil Oil Corporation leased four offshore tracts, each approximately 5,000 acres in size, in 1969 and filed applications the following year with the appropriate federal and state agencies to explore and develop what is now collectively known as the Lower Mobile Bay — Mary Ann Field. A well drilled to a depth of four miles proved that natural gas exists in the field, by testing some 12 million cubic feet a day (MMCFD) in 1978. After five more strategically placed appraisal wells were drilled Mobil announced in 1984 its plans to develop the field.

The Mary Ann Field came on stream at 35 MMCFD in April of 1988, although production now is at plant capacity of 100 MMCFD. The development of the field involved the placement of three offshore production platforms, and a central facility through which the natural gas from all the wells in the field flows. Raw natural gas from the field is transported through a pipeline nearly 15 miles to a treatment plant where impurities such as hydrogen sulfide, carbon dioxide and water vapor are removed. Sulfur generated by the treatment process is sold directly to customers in the Mobile area.

Alabama workers performed more than three-fourths of the labor that went into the construction of the Mary Ann field treatment plant, and Mobil spent more than $41 million for related materials and services. Of even greater significance to the state’s economy were the series of lease sales in the drilling area, contributing more than $800 million in bonus payments. In addition, the federal government also leased Outer Continental Shelf tracts for more than $600 million. Mobil and other energy companies have identified several additional prospects that resulted from these lease sales.

As the fields went on line, Mobil, Engeren and Transco Energy Corporation announced the signing of contracts leading to the initial distribution of the Mary Ann Field’s natural gas to consumers in central Alabama. Approximately 18 billion cubic feet of gas a year is scheduled for delivery into Alagasco’s Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma distribution networks. The new pipeline serving that distribution system not only serves that network, but will provide access to future Mobil and industry production capabilities in Mobile Bay.

The revenues from the $800 million in state lease sales are invested in two trust funds that have generated hundreds of millions more dollars for the state, for a total income of more than one billion dollars. Millions more will be generated annually from the Mary Ann project through royalty and severance income as production continues.

Mobil had invested approximately $400 million in the project at the time of the initial field production, providing jobs for area craftsmen and business for Alabama companies. The Mary Ann field is providing a clean, efficient energy source, and as a project, has been recognized as the pacesetter that sparked the discovery of other fields that could establish offshore Alabama as one of the nation’s most important new producing provinces.