Public Perceptions of Water Quality in Iowa: Results from the 2015 Statewide Survey

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Special Thanks

Mitch Avery and our team of talented RAs for significant assistance preparing these slides

The hundreds of Iowans who took time to participate and provide thoughtful and important information

Primary Purpose

To help inform a statewide campaign to raise awareness on water quality issues, motivate involvement, and change behaviors in households & communities

Research design

Mixed methods:

- Qualitative (focus groups): informed the survey development and questionnaire topics
- Quantitative (statewide survey): included Iowans 18 years of age or older

Focus Group Methods

Four, 90-minute focus groups

Two urban and two rural counties

Participants: 17 males, 12 females
Mean age 57 years
93% White, non-Hispanic
45% lived on a farm or small town (<5K)

Coded for major themes within and across groups

Select Quotes

General perceptions

*…how **necessary** it is; thinking back to the flood and being without water for several days and the fact that **we take it for granted**.*

*I think **the farming methods** -- we have a lot of* [agriculture]-- *and that can be good or bad. I think most people in this area are concerned about and they're careful.*

Knowledge about waterways

*I guess **I don't know** what the hell watershed is...*

*There is a small creek but **I don't know** what it is.*

*It's just the flow, the direction of flow, of the **water that comes off the land**.*

Select Quotes

Attitudes about Public Policy Regarding Water Quality

Myself. Everyone, I mean, ***everyone's responsible*** *from the 10 year old kid to the mega corporations*

…when that water goes down stream and pollutes the [redacted] *water system it is not his water and it's not his land,* ***it's everybody's****... You have to have some sort of regulations to* ***protect the interest of the public****.*

Focus Group Key Themes

Associations with the word "*water*" focused on *drinking water*
(vs waterways for recreation)

Local geography impacts perceptions of water/water quality

Urban/rural differences in knowledge/views of agricultural, development,
& industrial impacts on water quality

Causes of poor water quality (in both urban/rural areas) focused on
agriculture practices

Improving and protecting water quality was viewed as a *shared responsibility*
by most

Recent events and experiences with water (e.g. local flooding, boil orders, etc.)
influence awareness and salience of water quality

Survey Design & Administration

Target population: Iowans ≥ 18 yrs

Feb. 17, 2015 - June 18, 2015 (English & Spanish)

Average length: 34 mins

Dual-frame RDD (both landlines and cell phones)

n = 2,080 (384 landline & 1,696 cell phone)

AAPOR RR3: 31%; AAPOR CR3: 71%

Margin of sampling error: +/-1.2% (full sample)

Survey Content

General views on environment & water quality

Understanding water quality & causes of water pollution

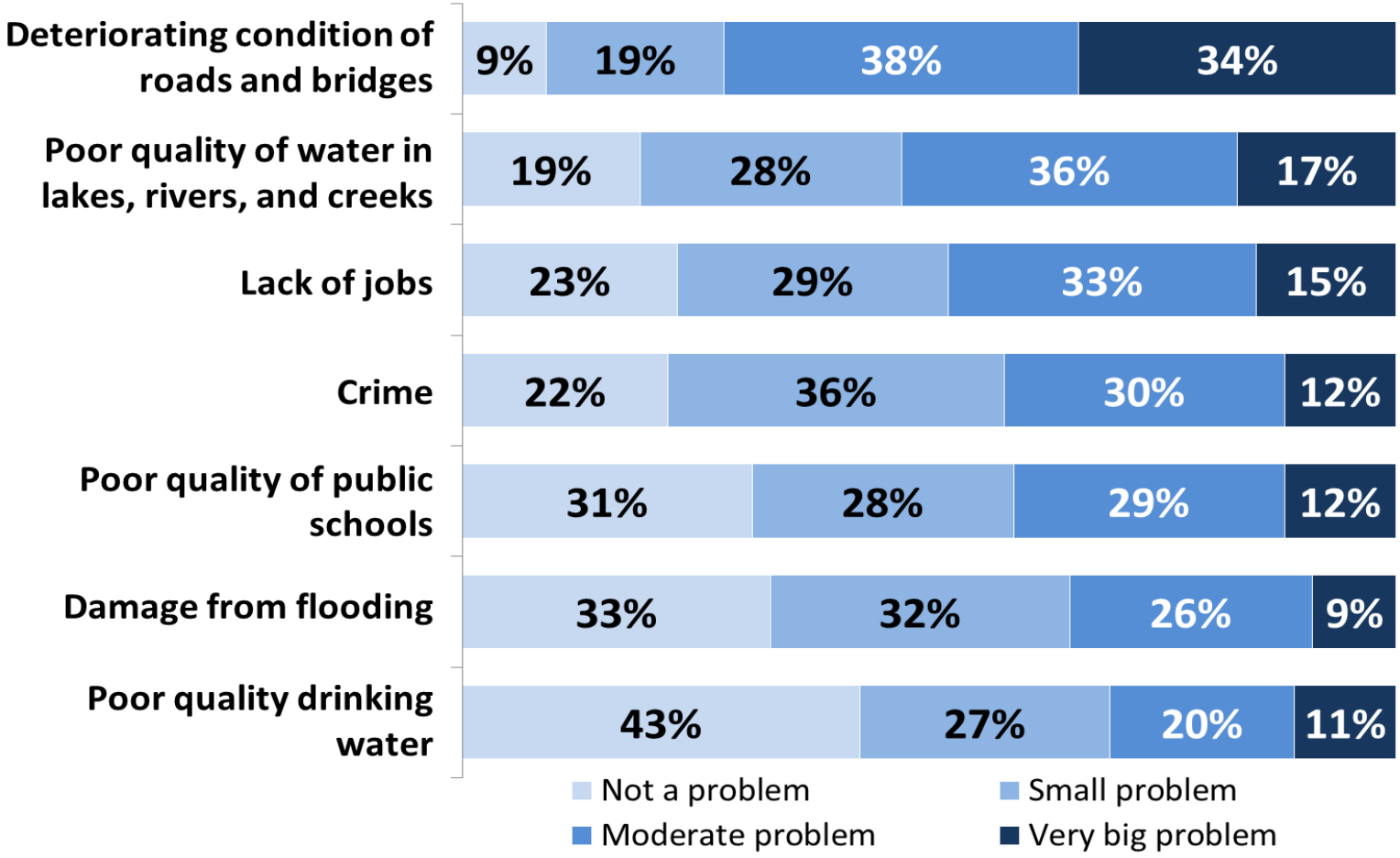
Participation in recreational activities in/on water

Positive/negative environmental behaviors that impact water quality

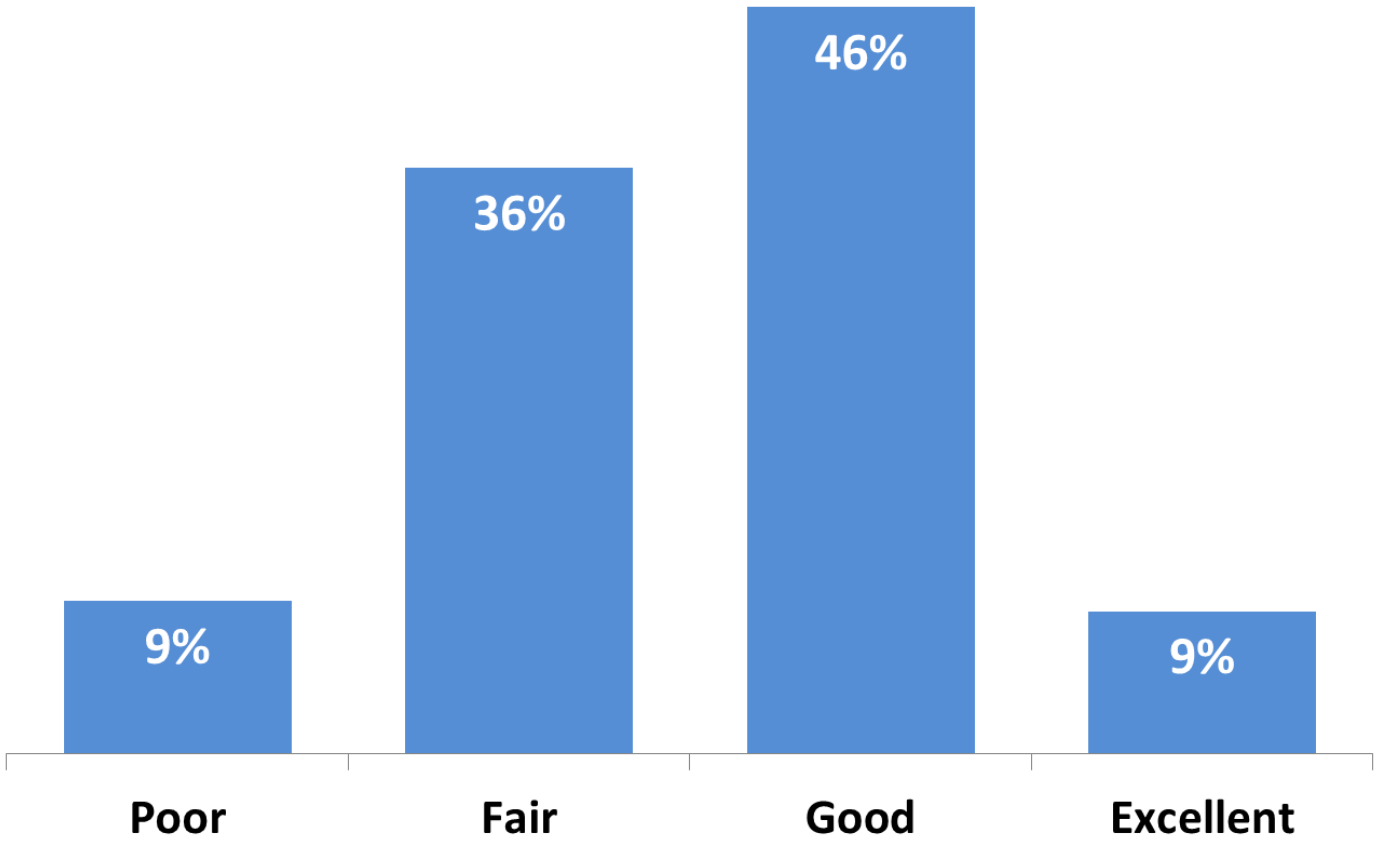
Awareness of strategies for improving water quality

Views about responsibility for improving water quality and willingness to pay/invest in water quality improvement

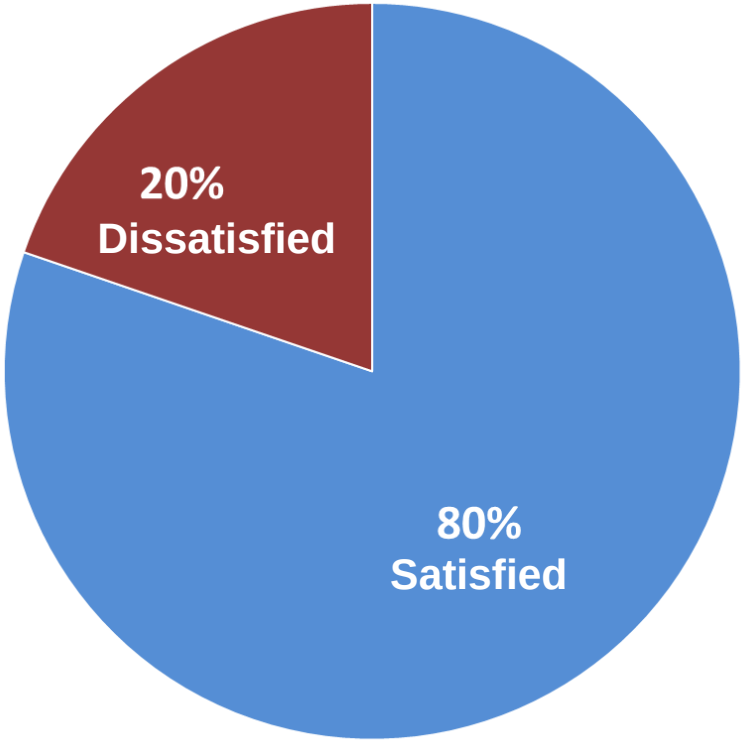
Perceptions of severity of issues facing Iowa



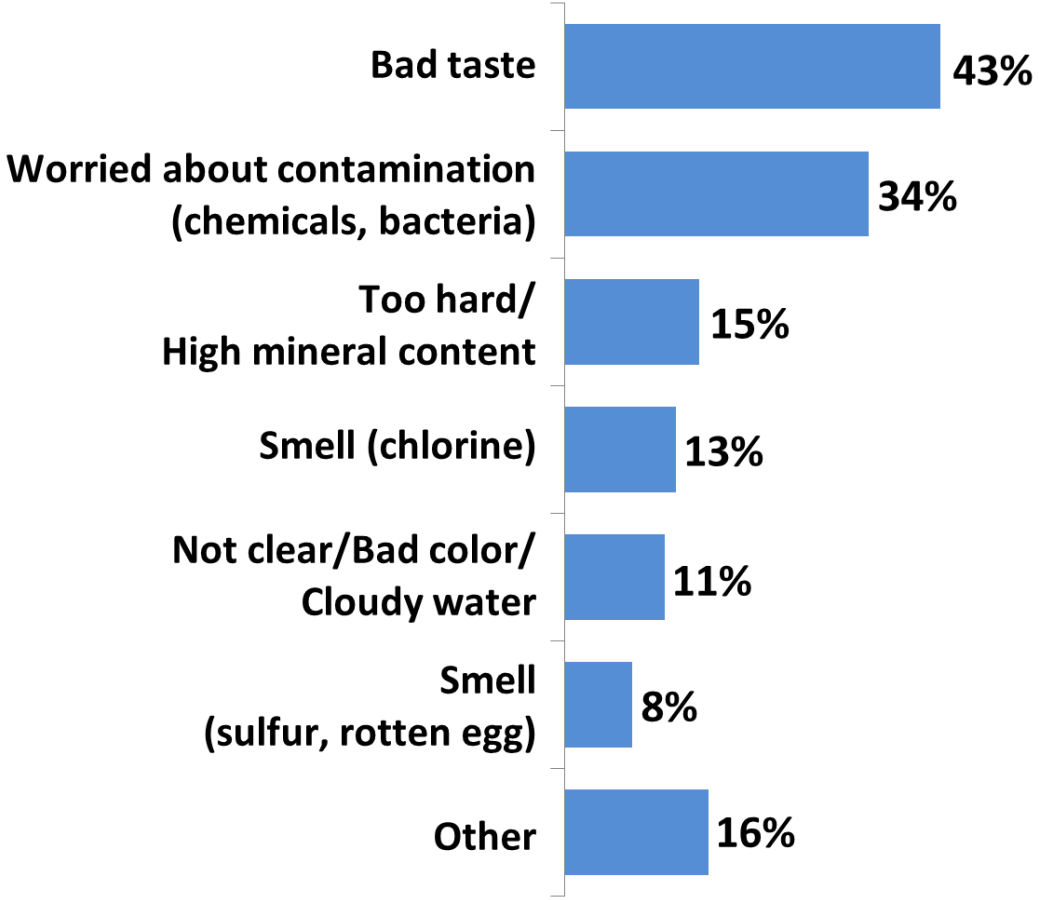
Perceptions of water quality in Iowa



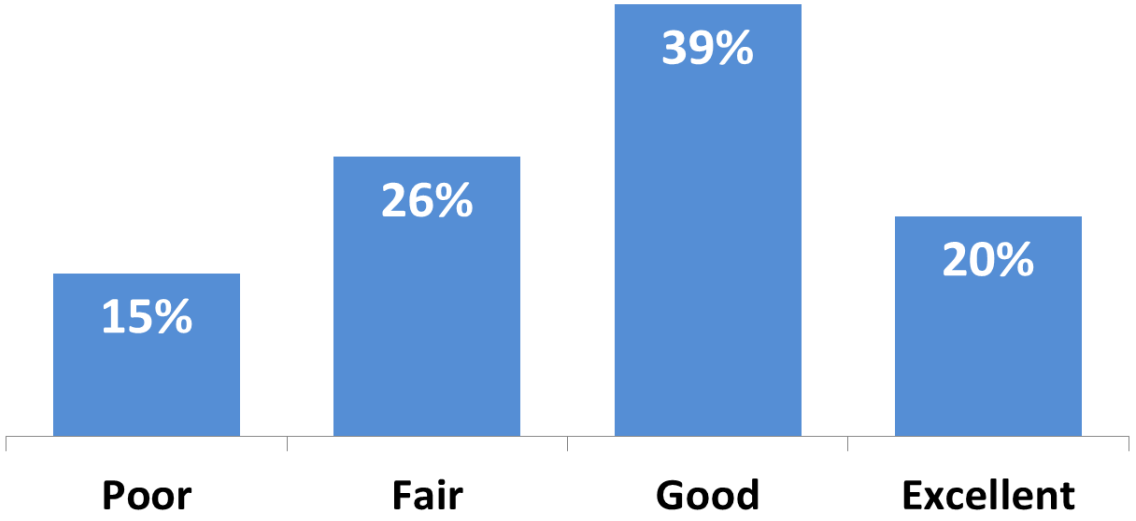
Satisfaction with the quality of water in the city or area where respondent lives



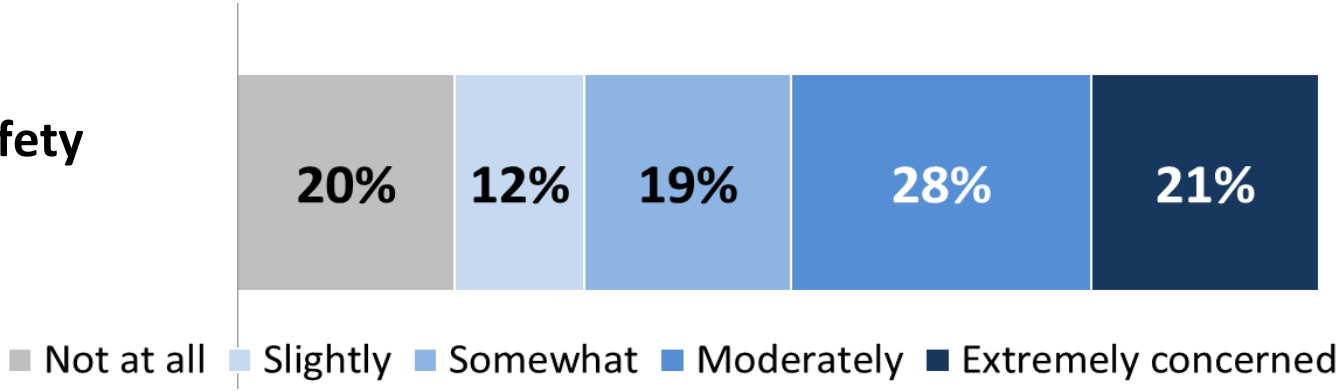
Aspects of water contributing to dissatisfaction with water quality



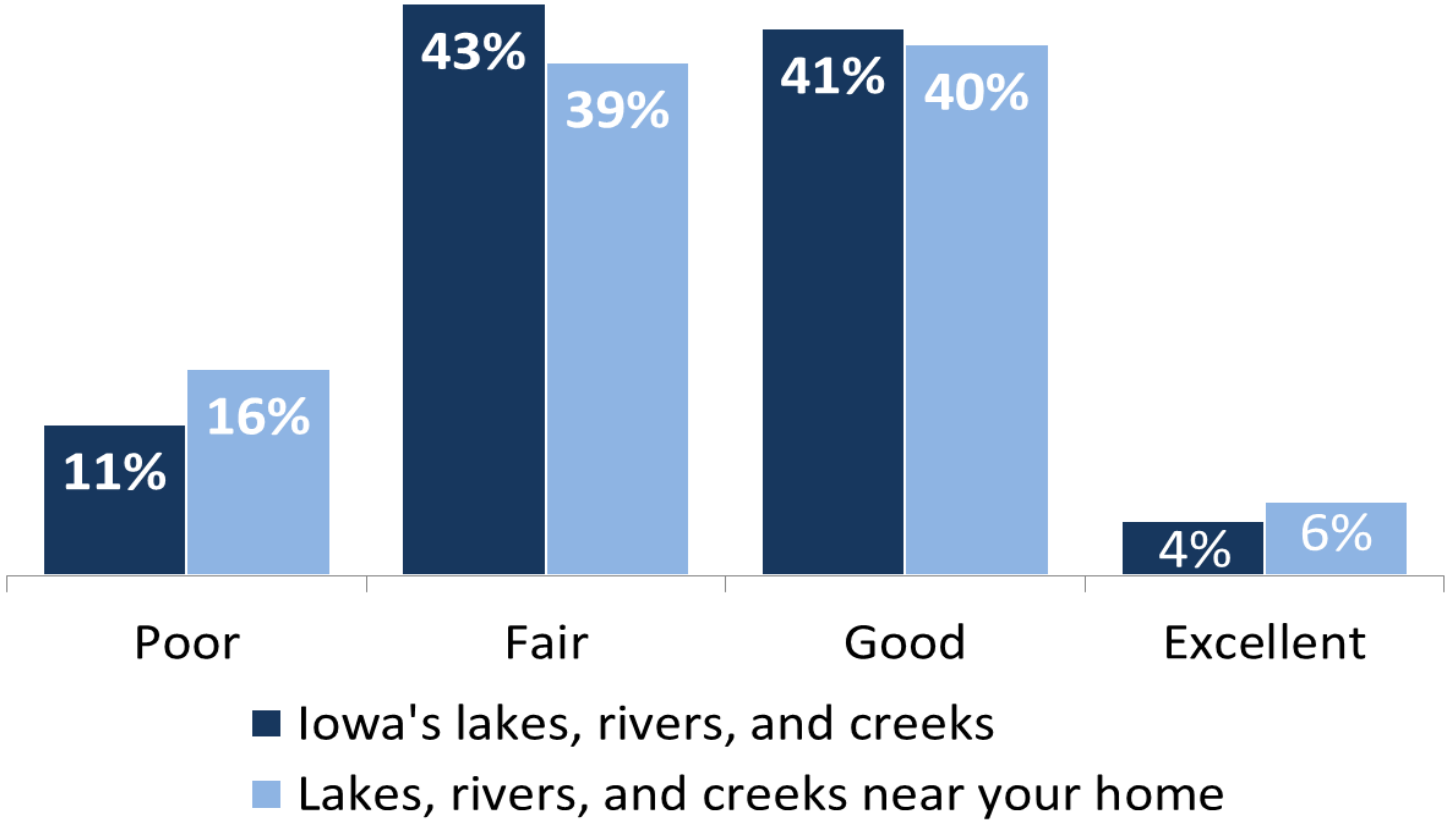
Perceptions of quality of unfiltered home drinking water from the faucet



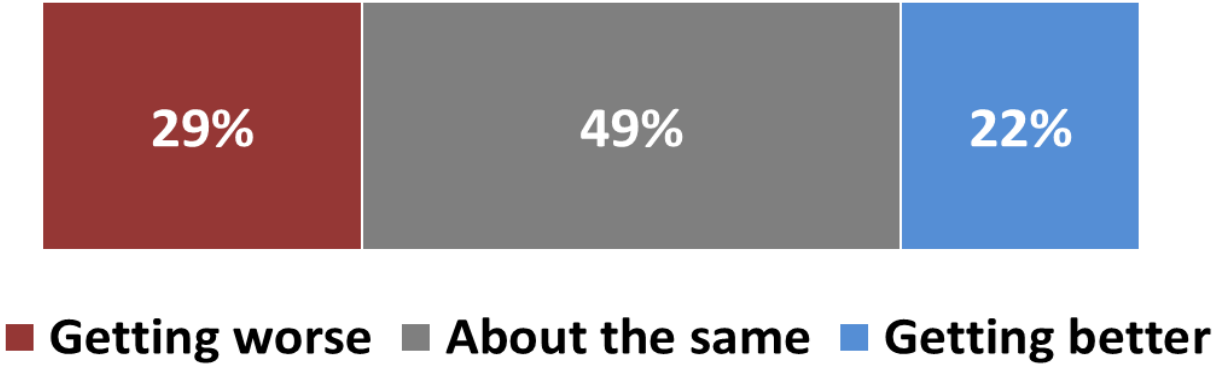
Concern over safety of tap water



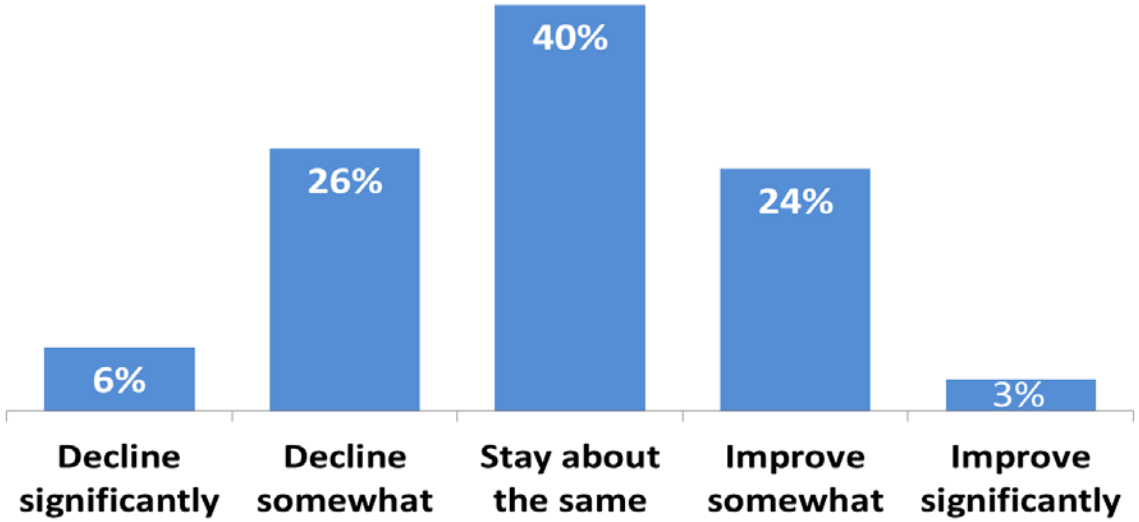
Perceptions of the quality of lakes, rivers and creeks in Iowa and near their home



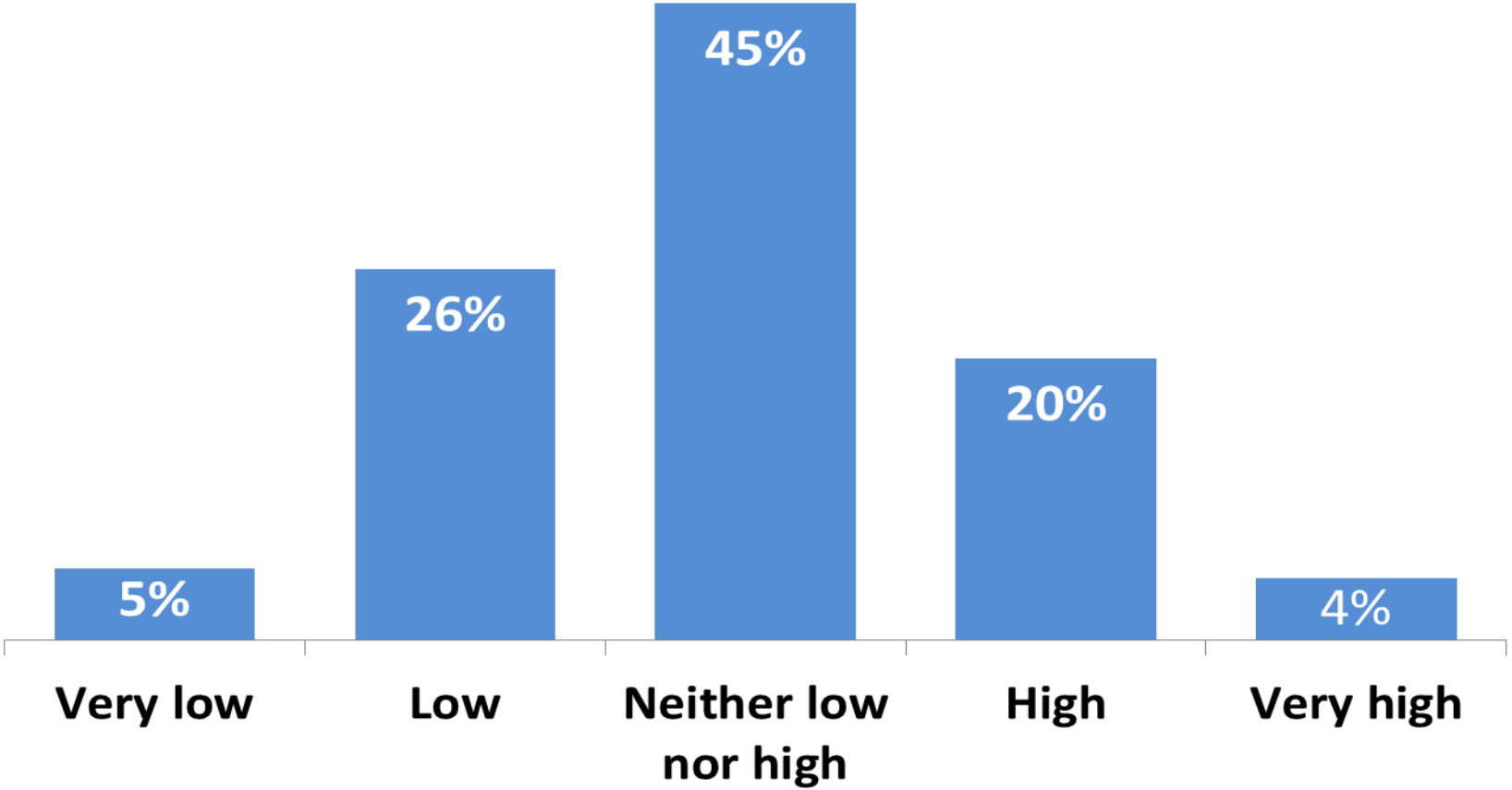
The overall quality of water in Iowa's lakes, rivers, and creeks is …



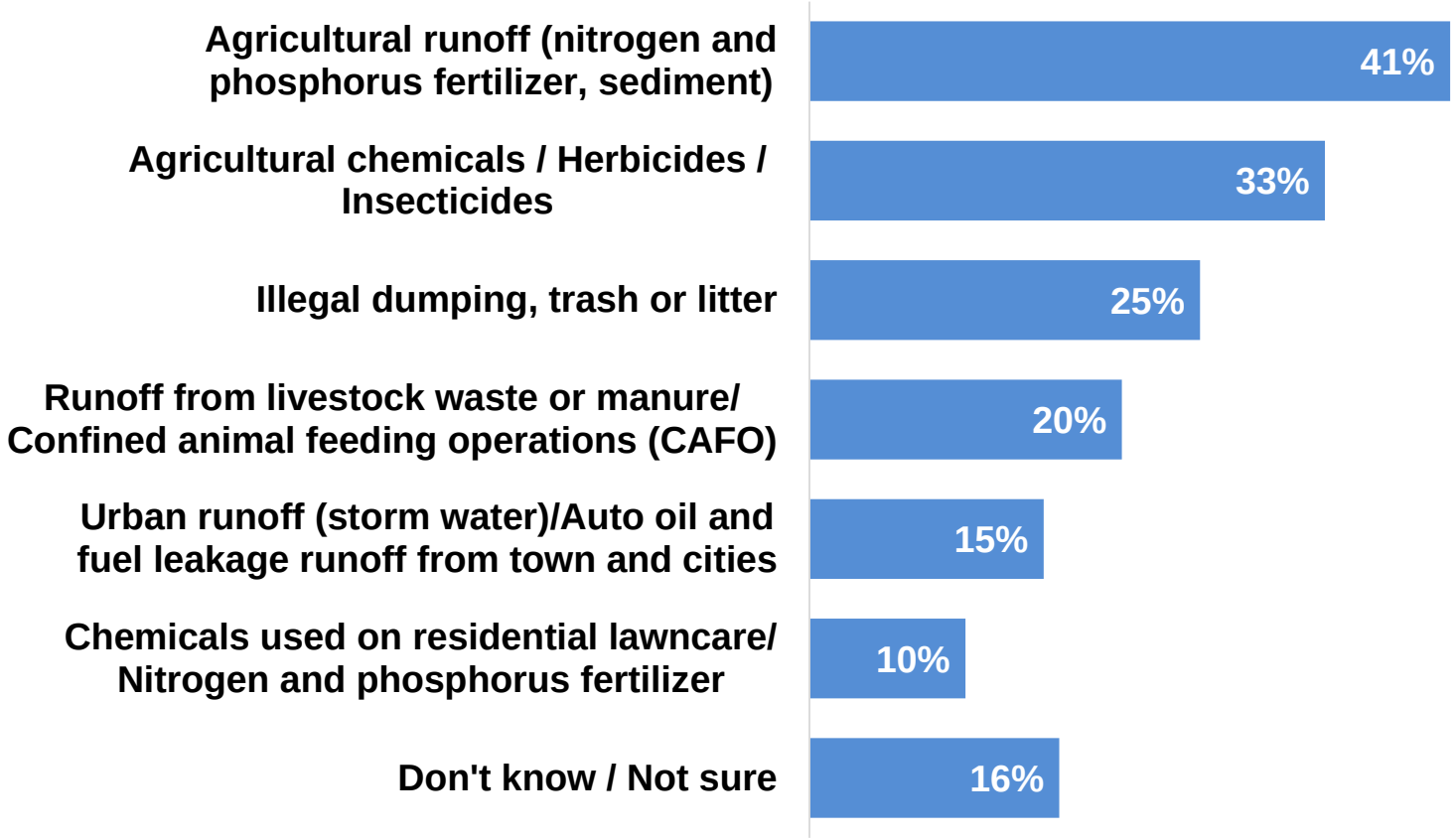
In the next 10 years, the quality of lakes, rivers, and creeks in [my] area will…



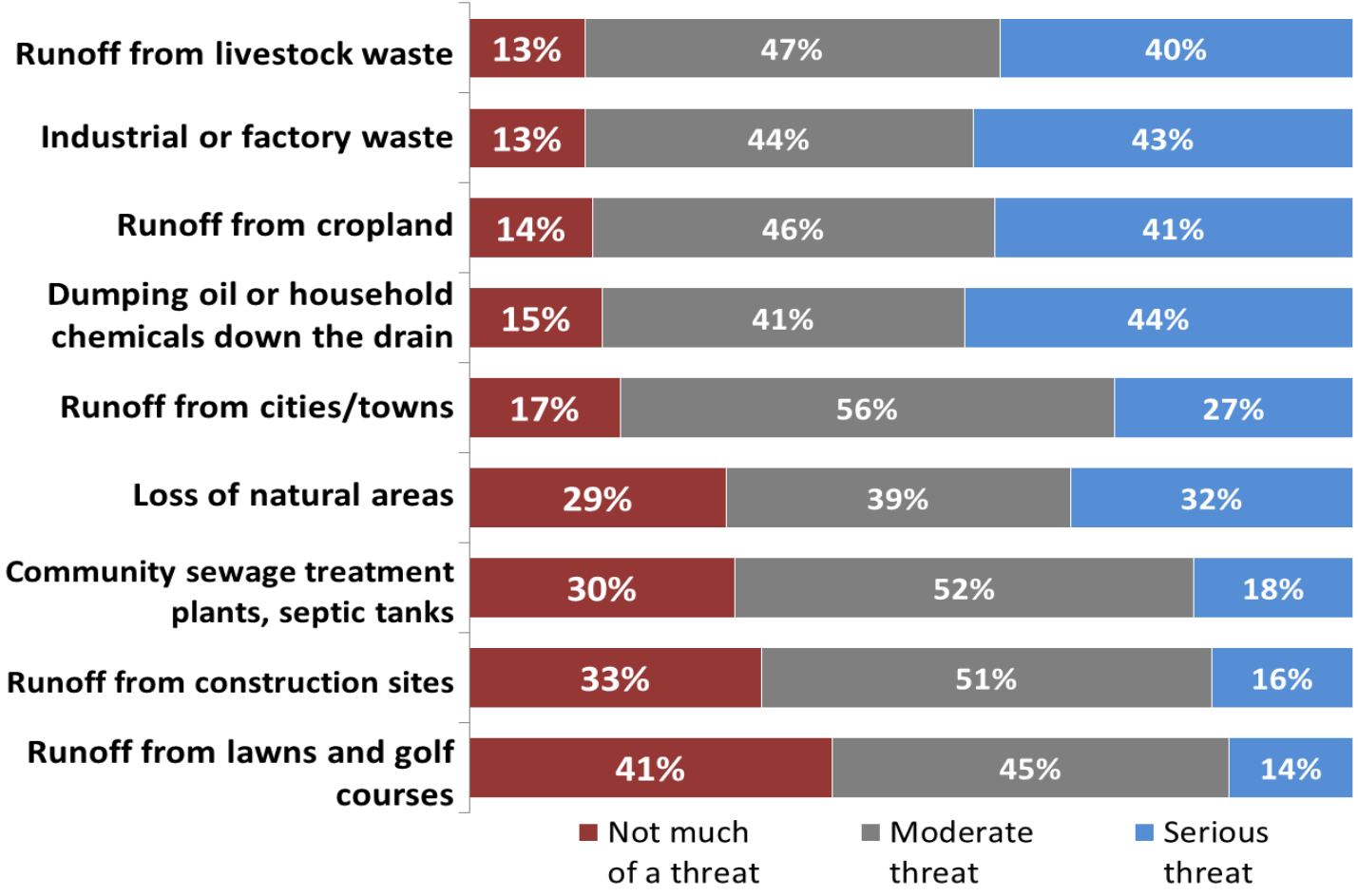
Self-reported level of knowledge regarding water quality issues



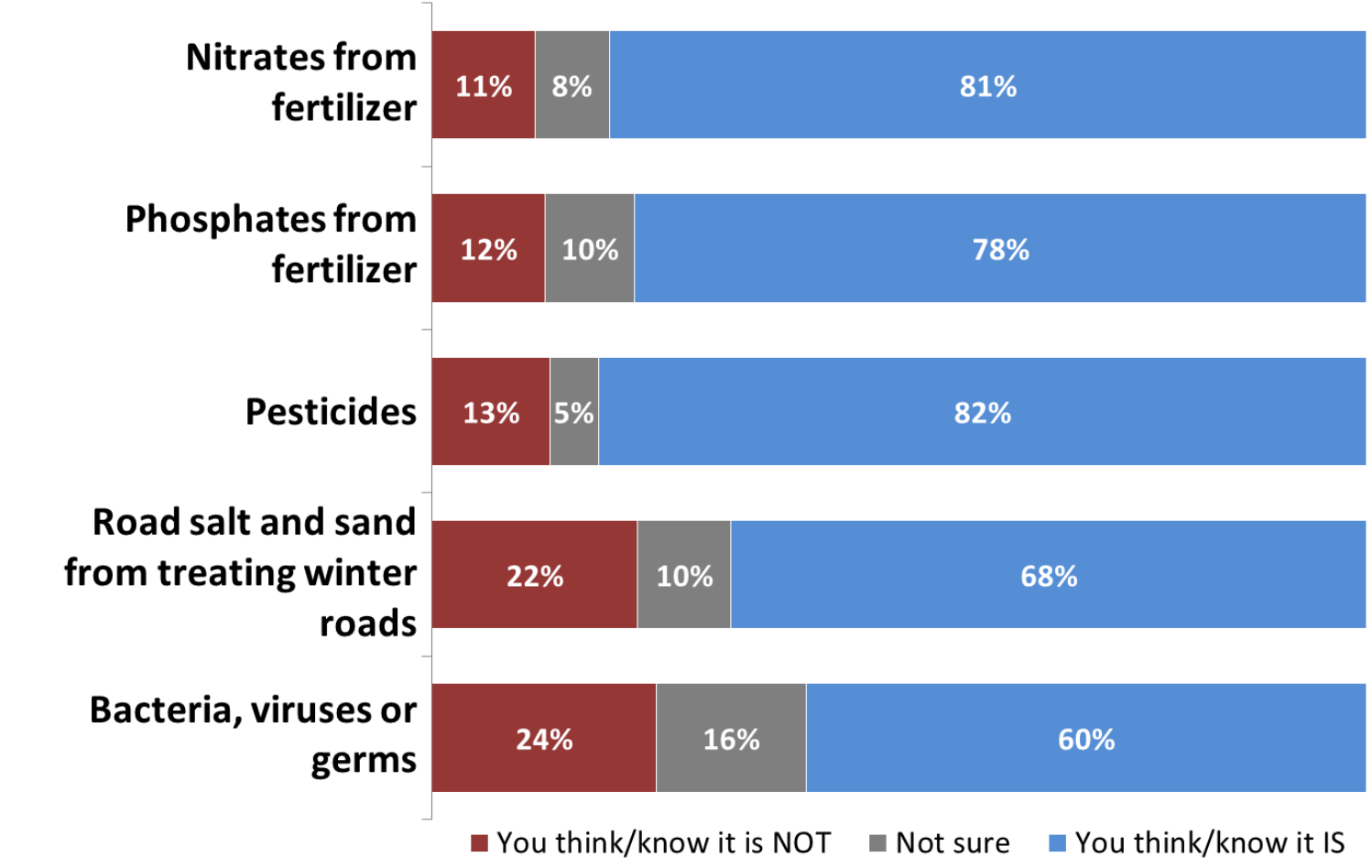
Uncued responses about sources of water pollution



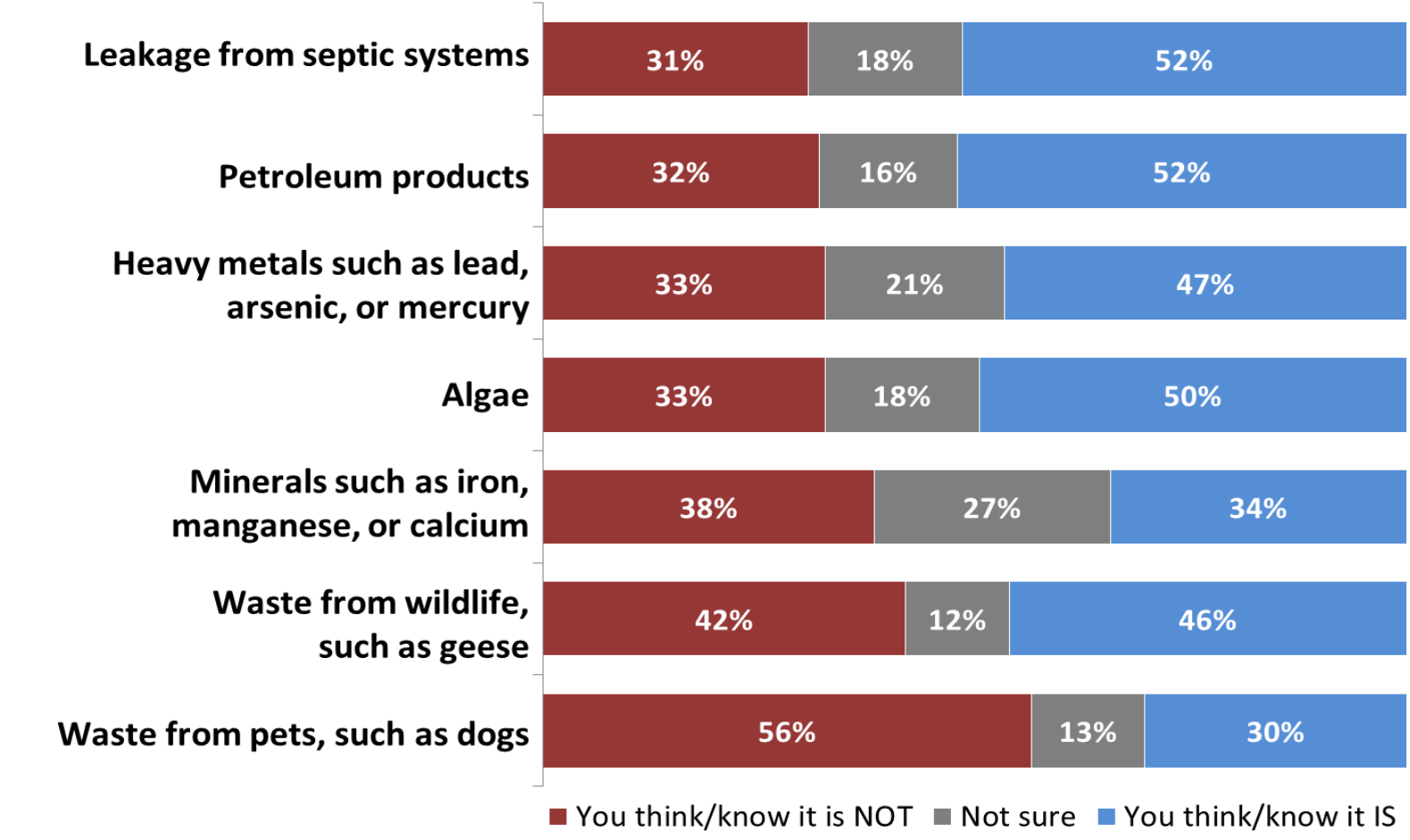
Perceptions of severity of threat posed to Iowa's water by pollution sources



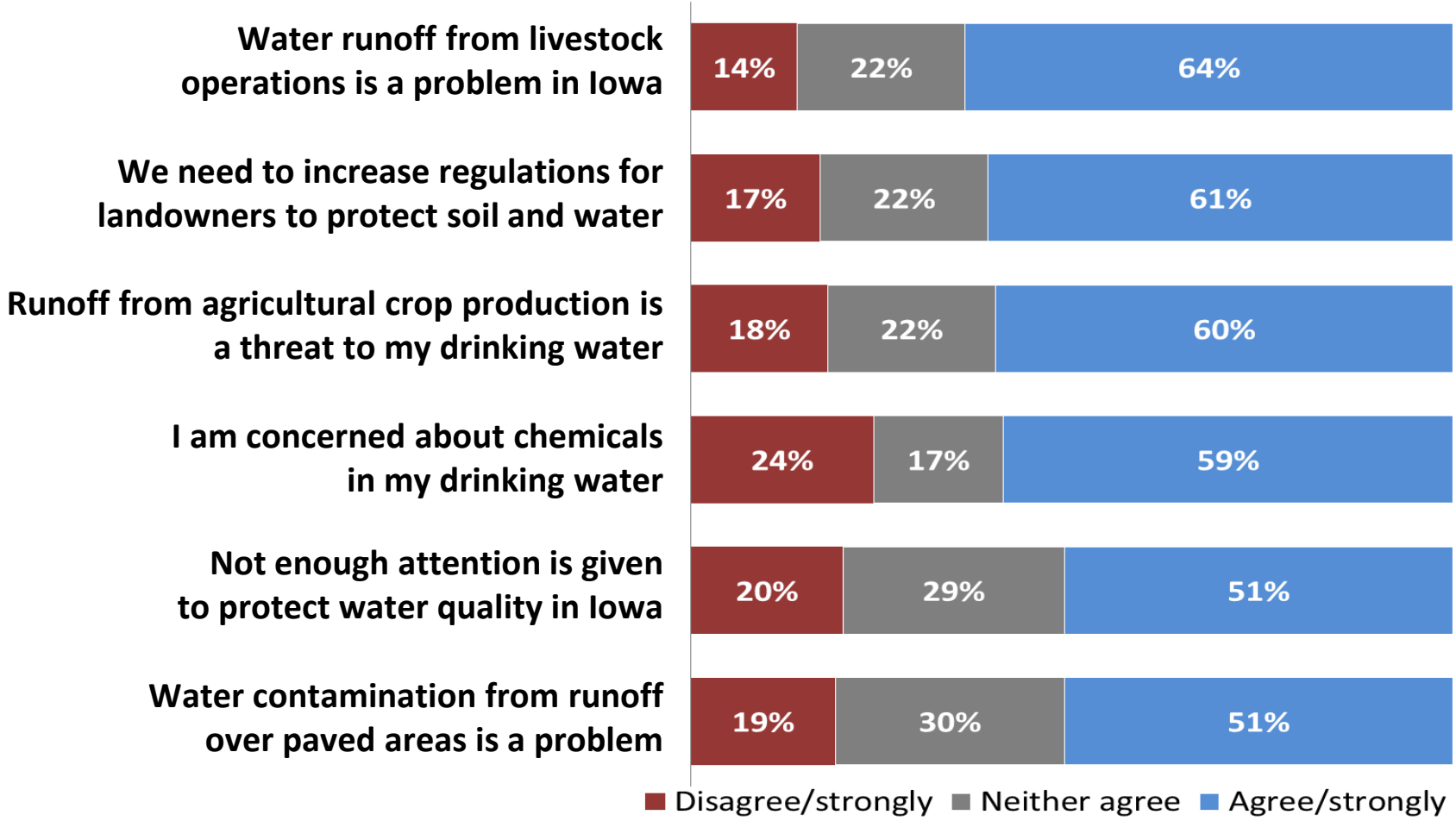
Perceptions of possible pollutants affecting waterways in their area (Top 5)



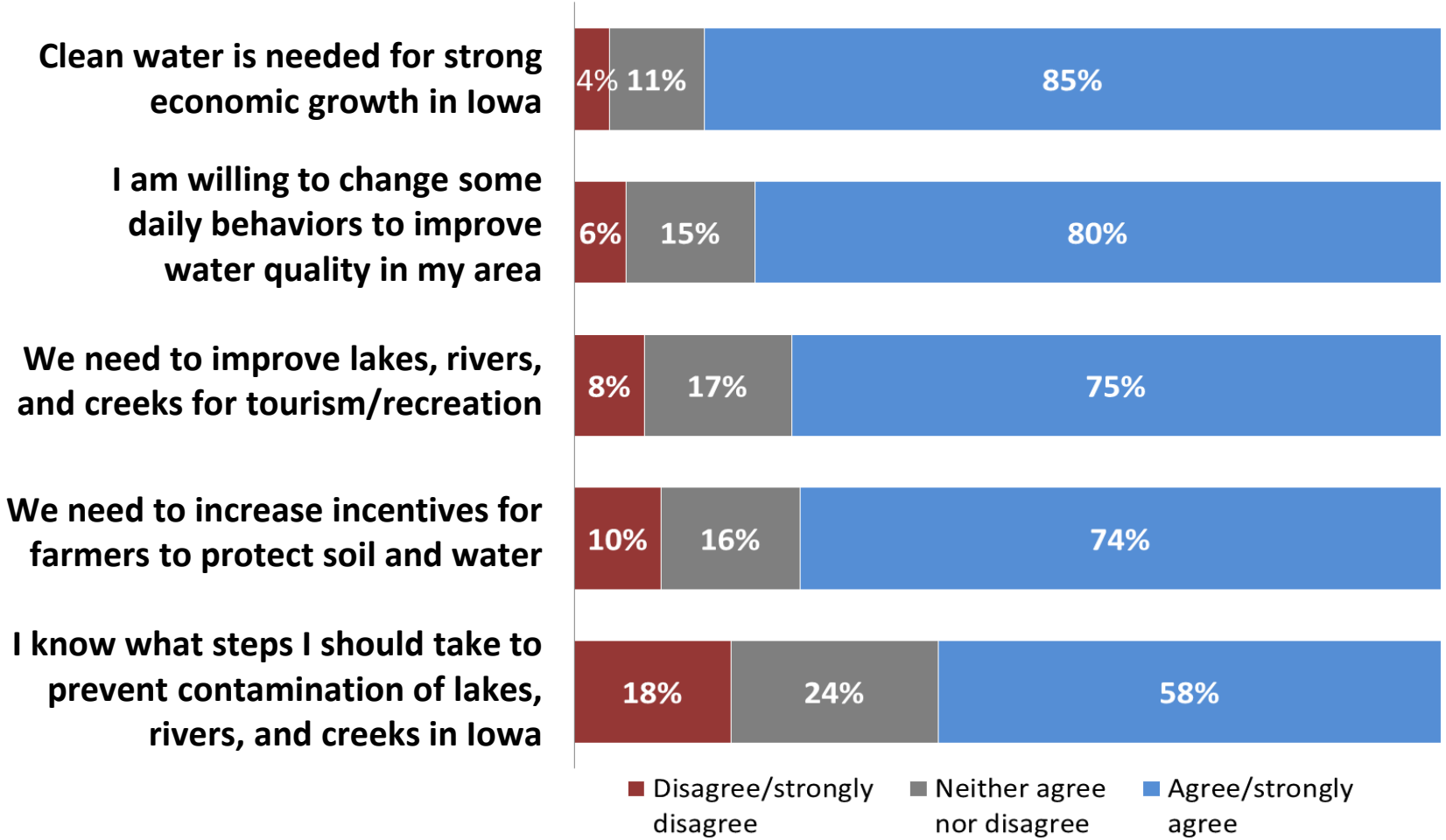
Perceptions of possible pollutants affecting waterways in their area (Bottom 7)



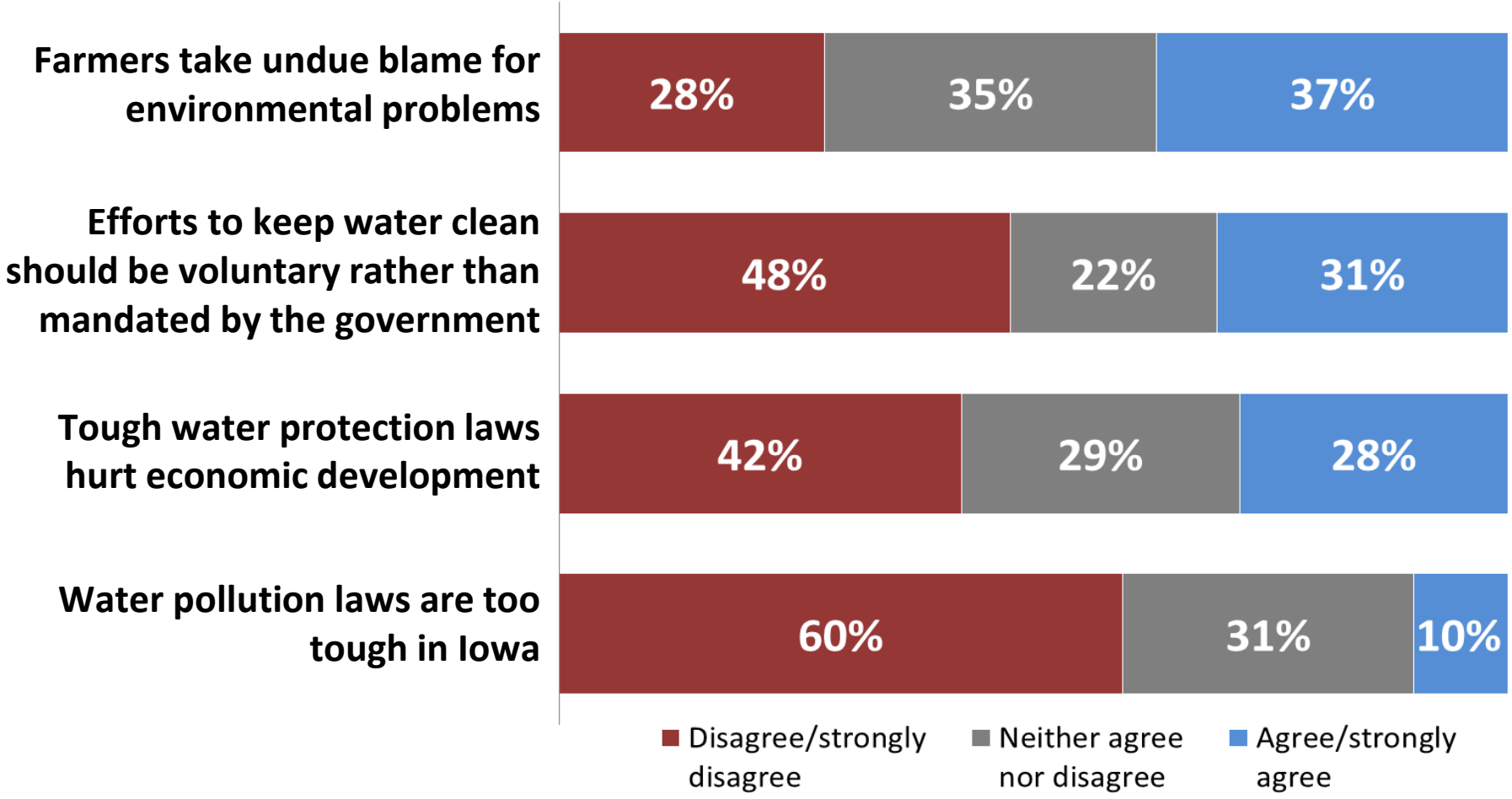
Attitudes toward potential threats to water quality



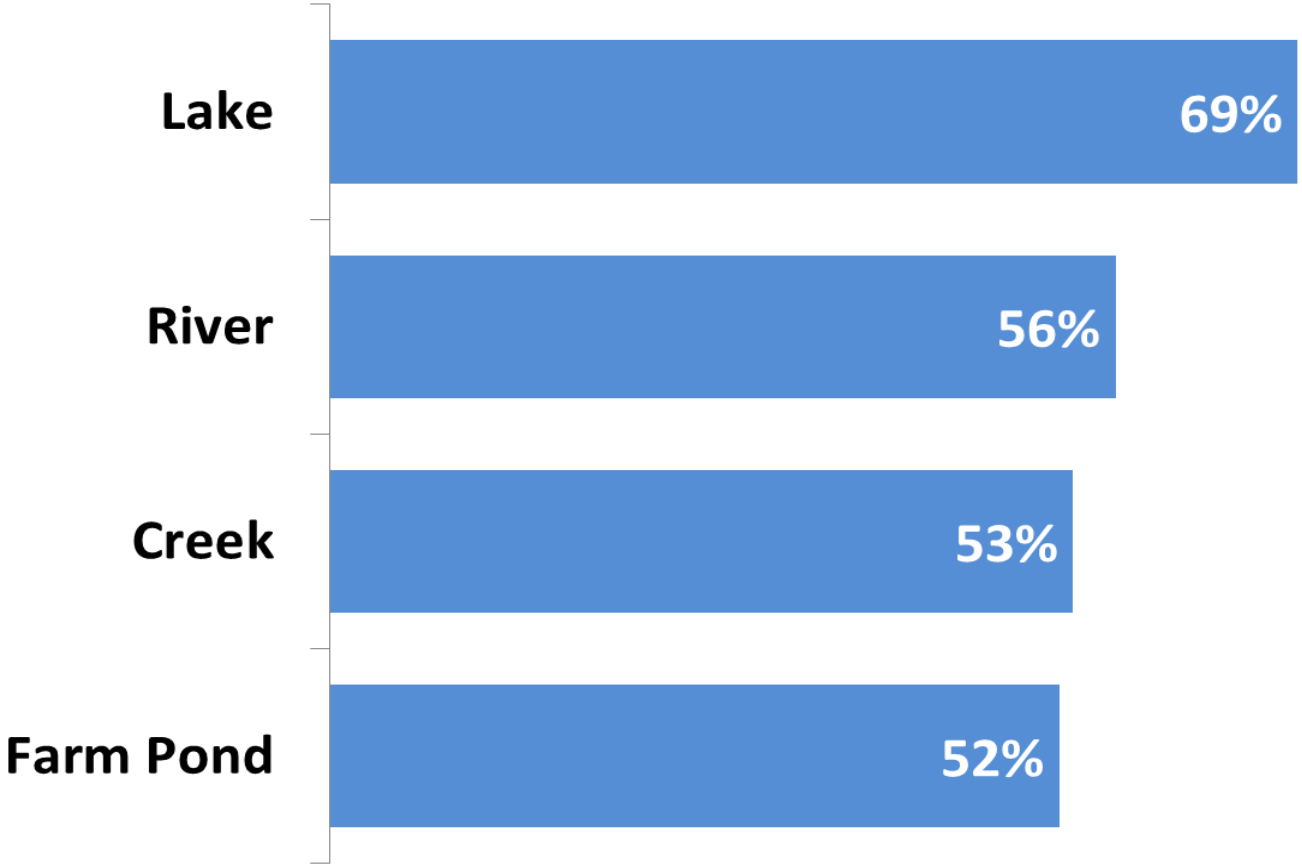
Attitudes about water quality improvement



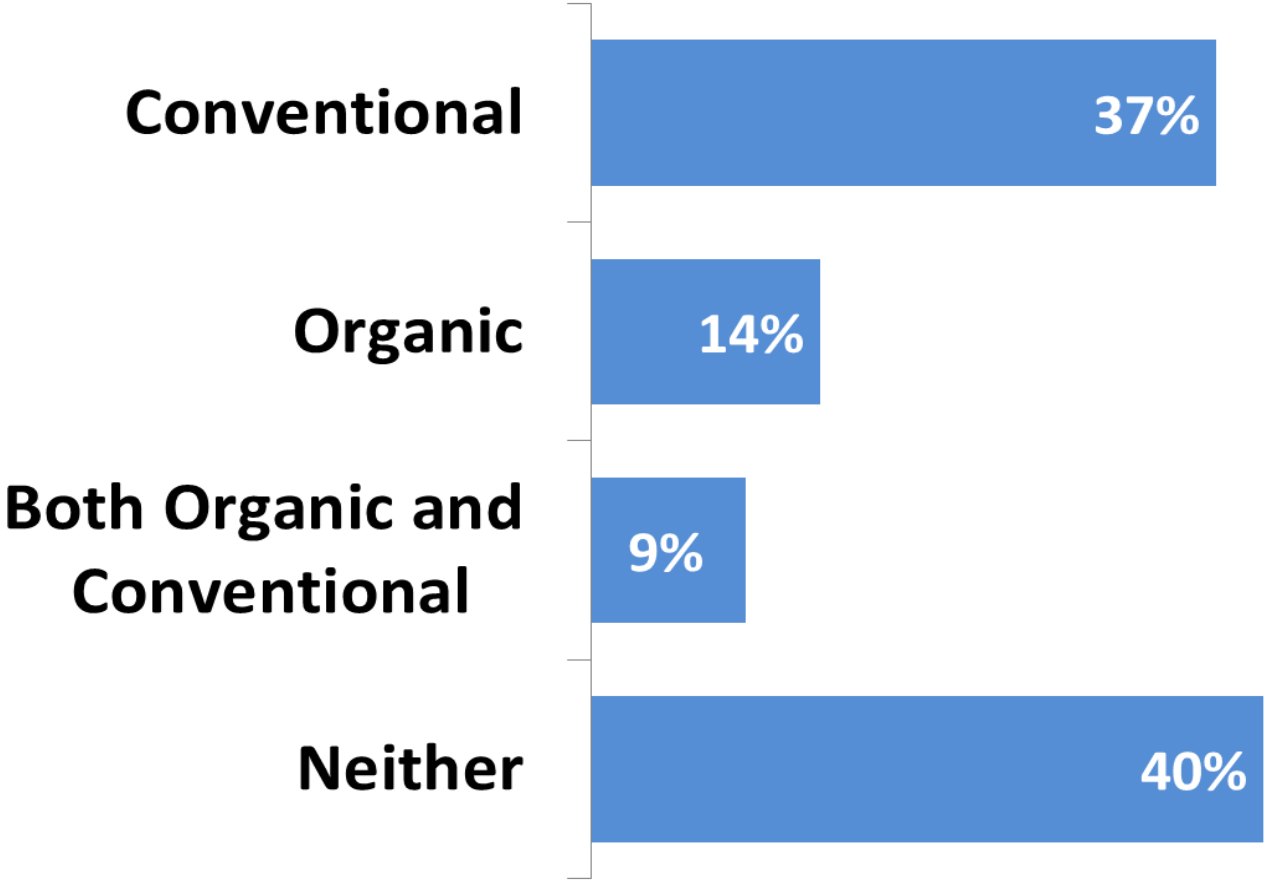
Attitudes toward policy-related statements about water quality



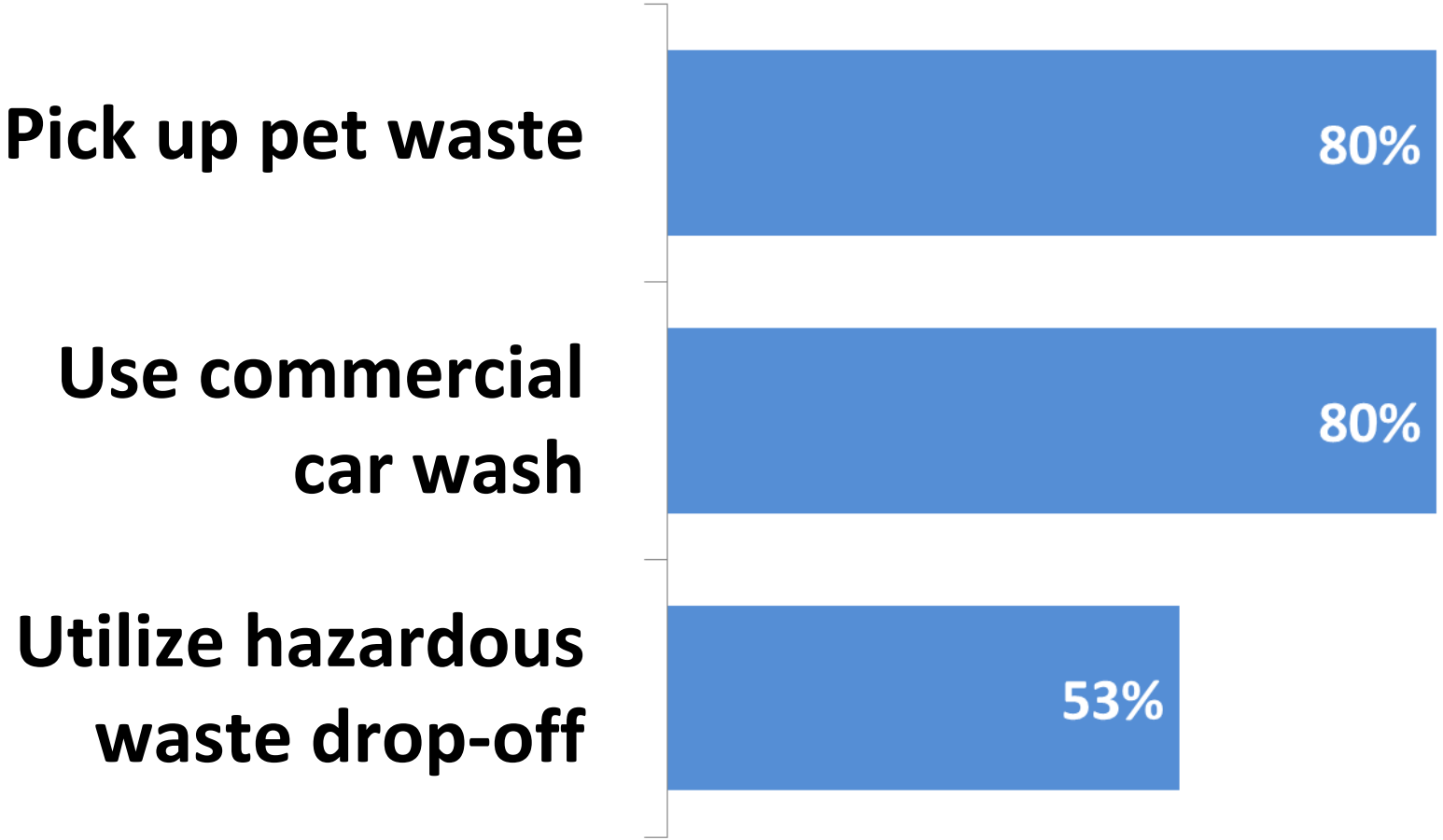
Percent of Iowans who believe it is safe to eat fish caught in Iowa waterways



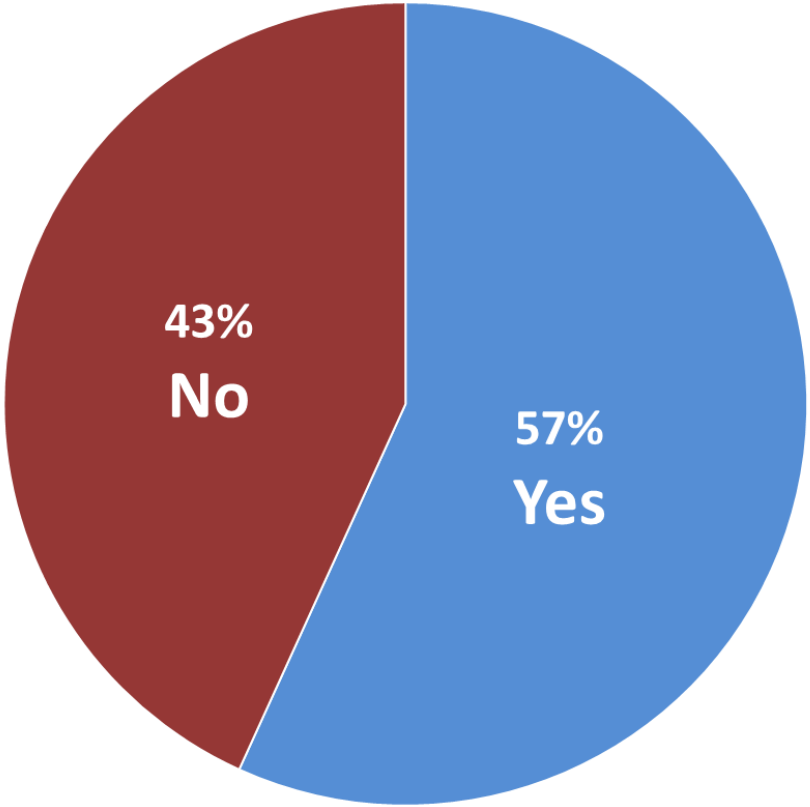
Reported types of fertilizer applied to Iowa lawns



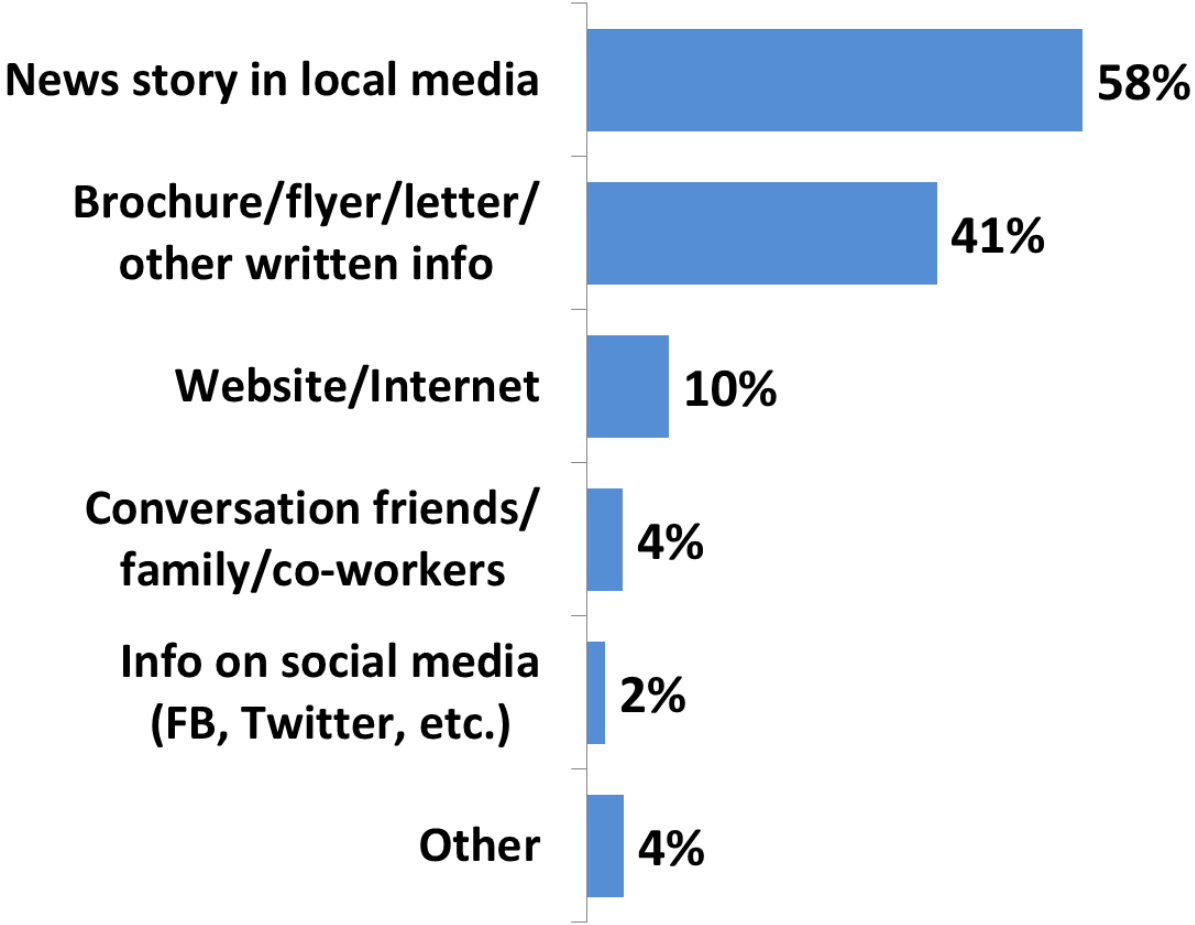
Reported positive behaviors impacting water quality



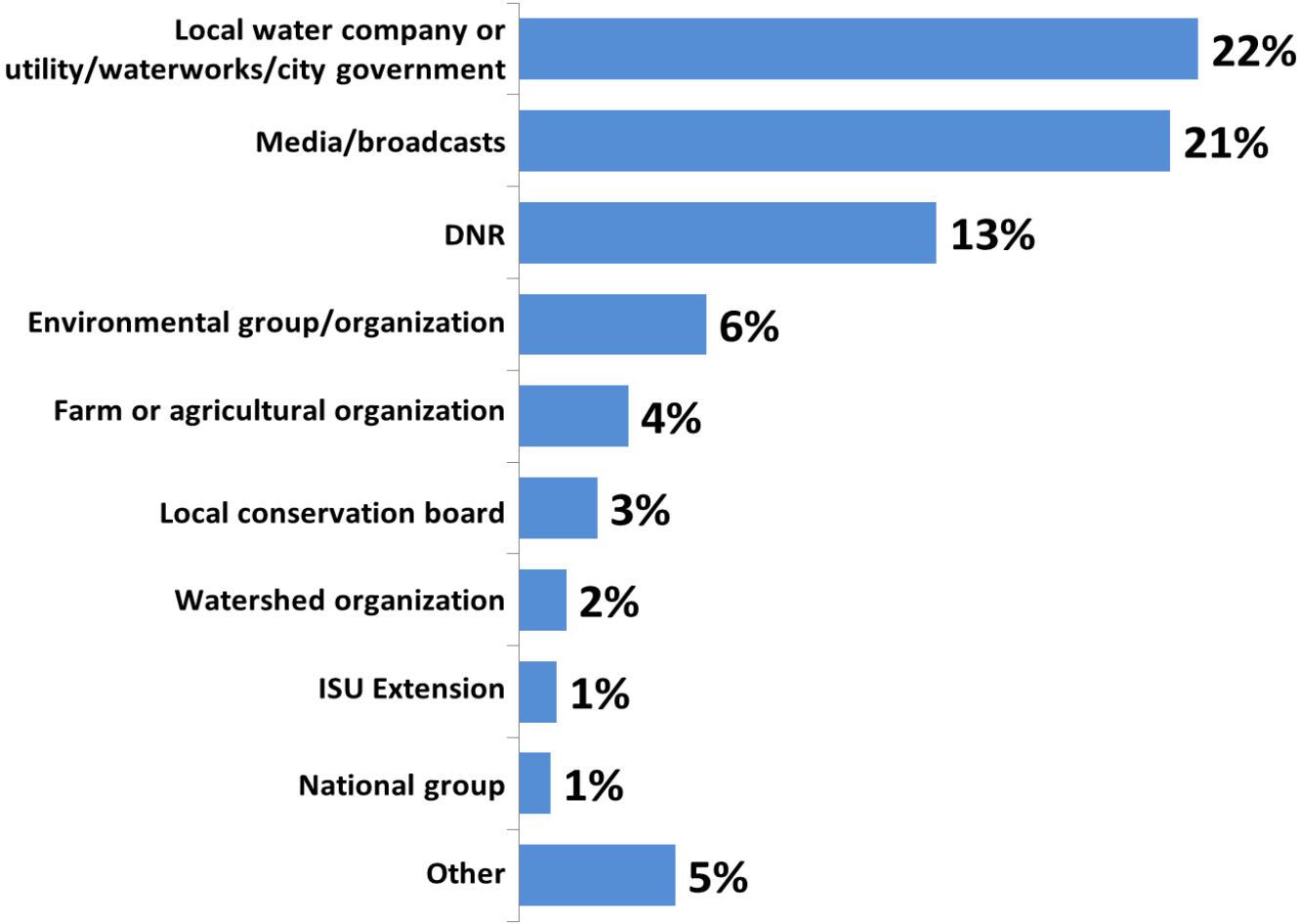
Percent of Iowans who recalled seeing, hearing, or reading information about water quality in their area



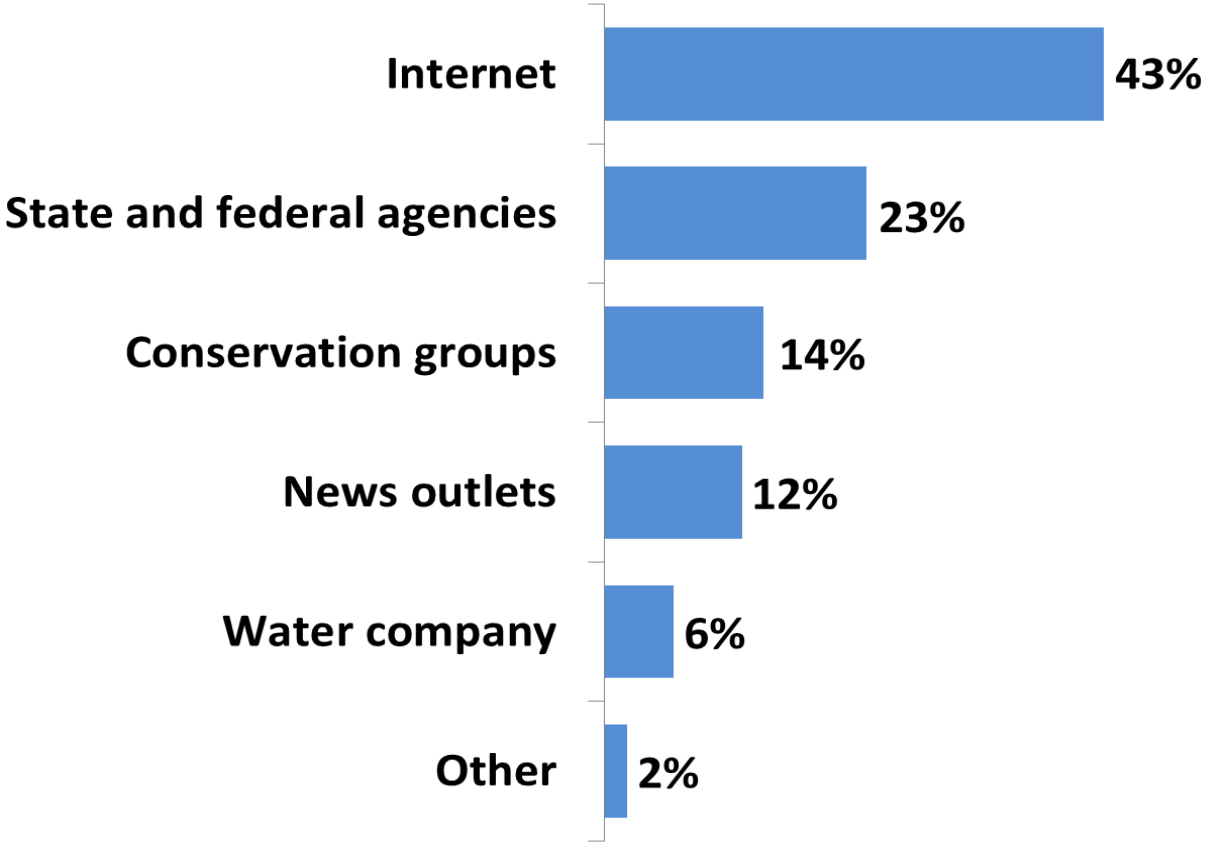
Form of information received



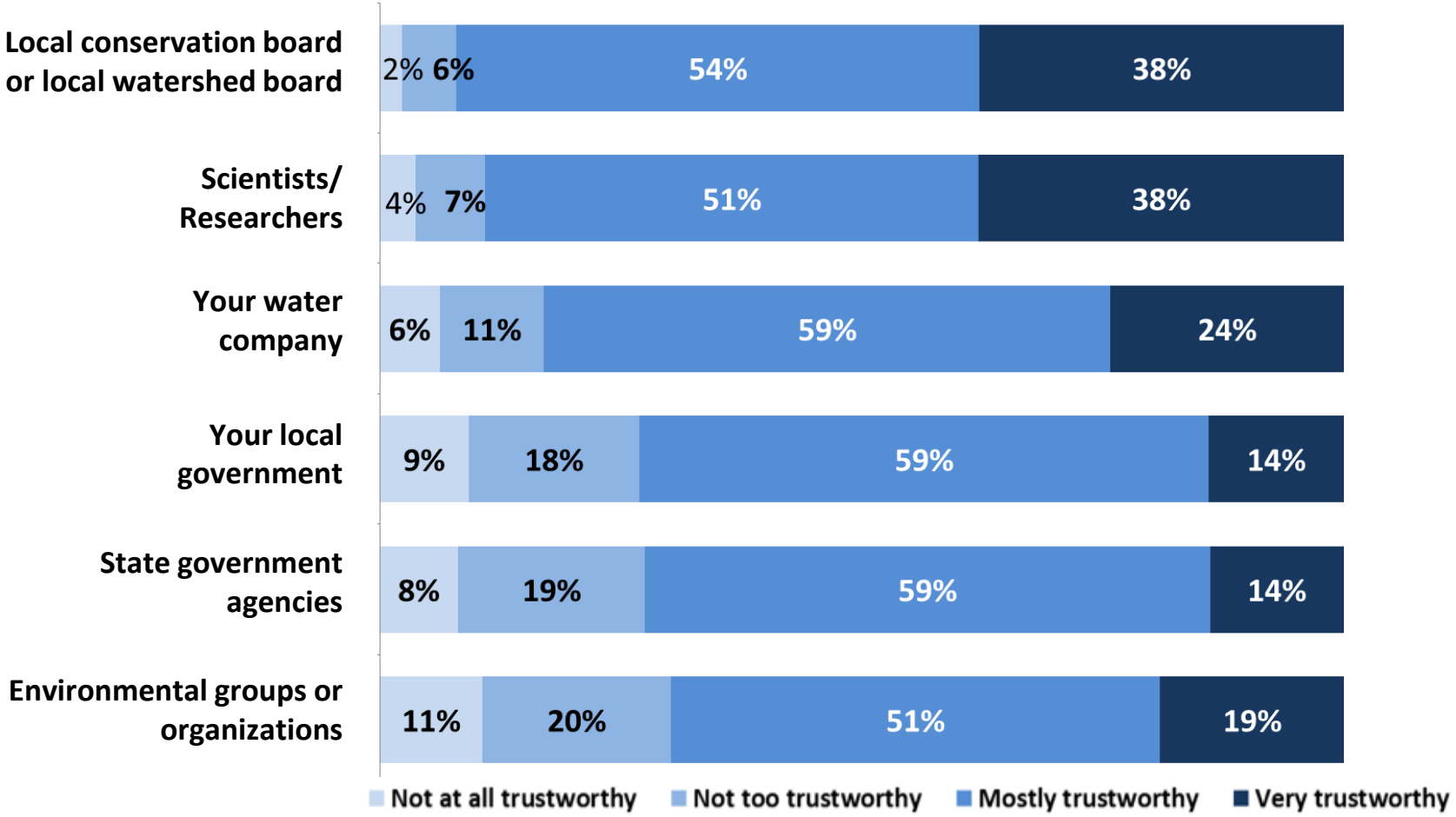
Source of information



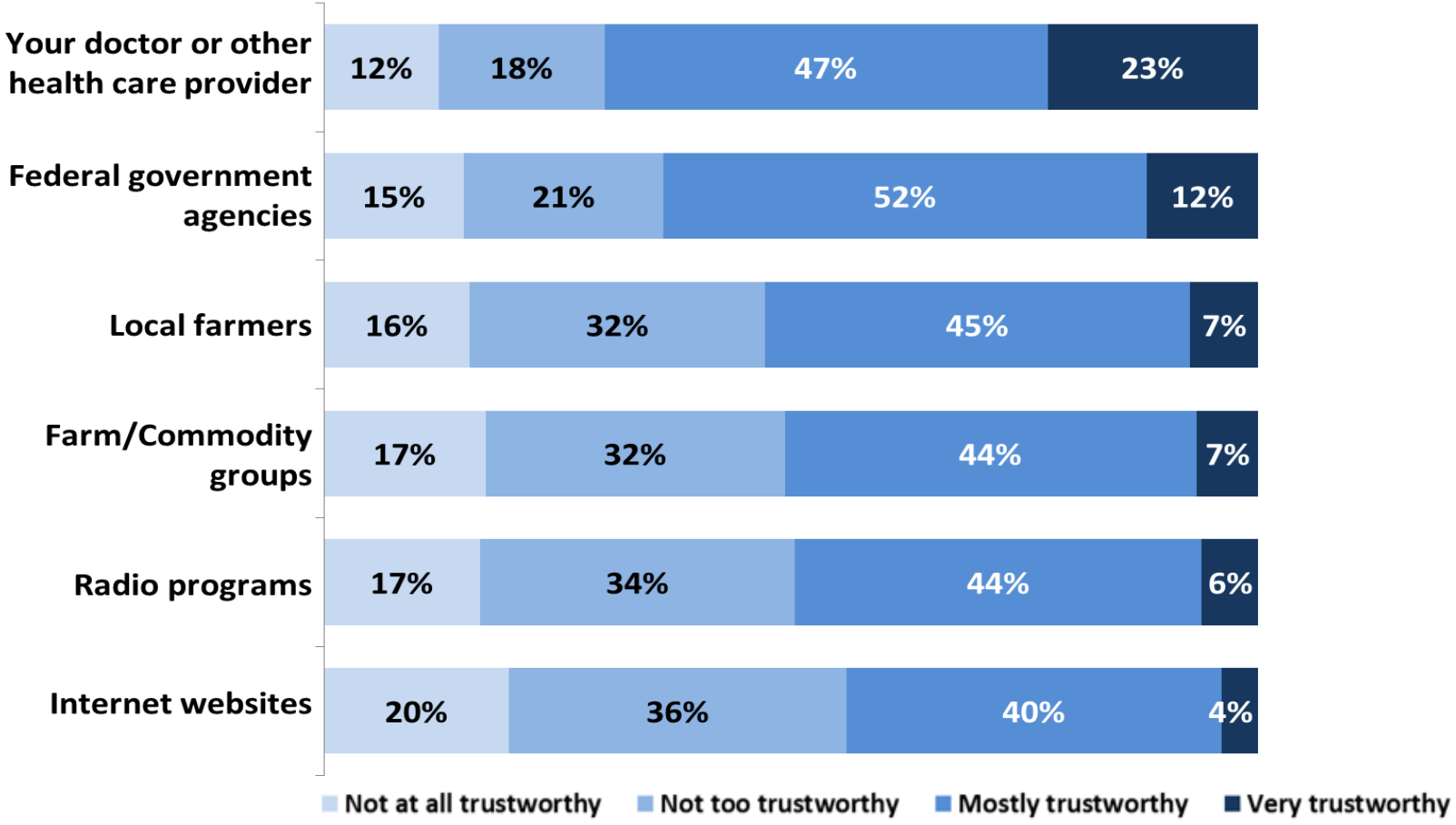
Information sources used for retrieving information about water quality and conservation



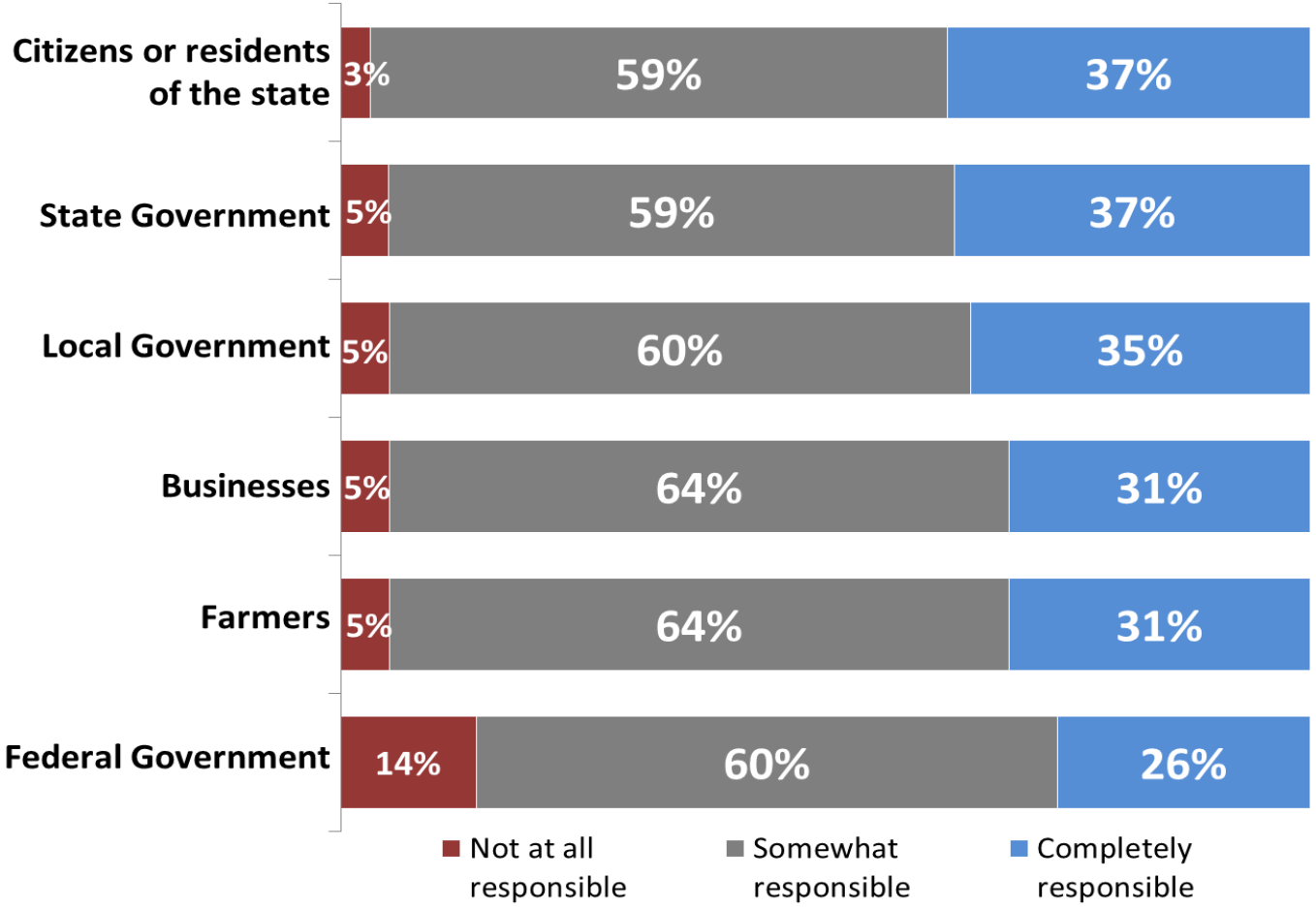
Trustworthiness of sources



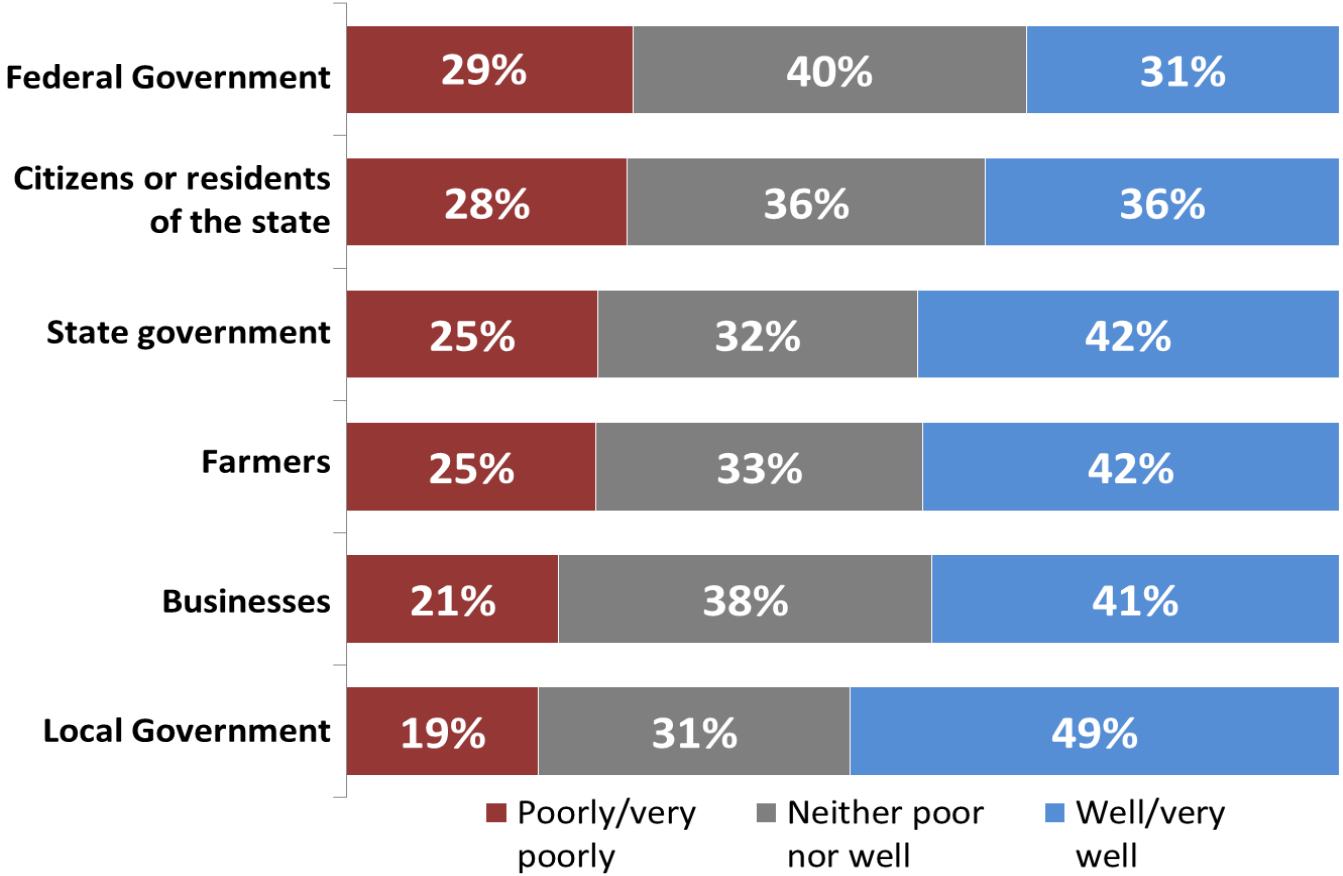
Trustworthiness of sources (PART 2)



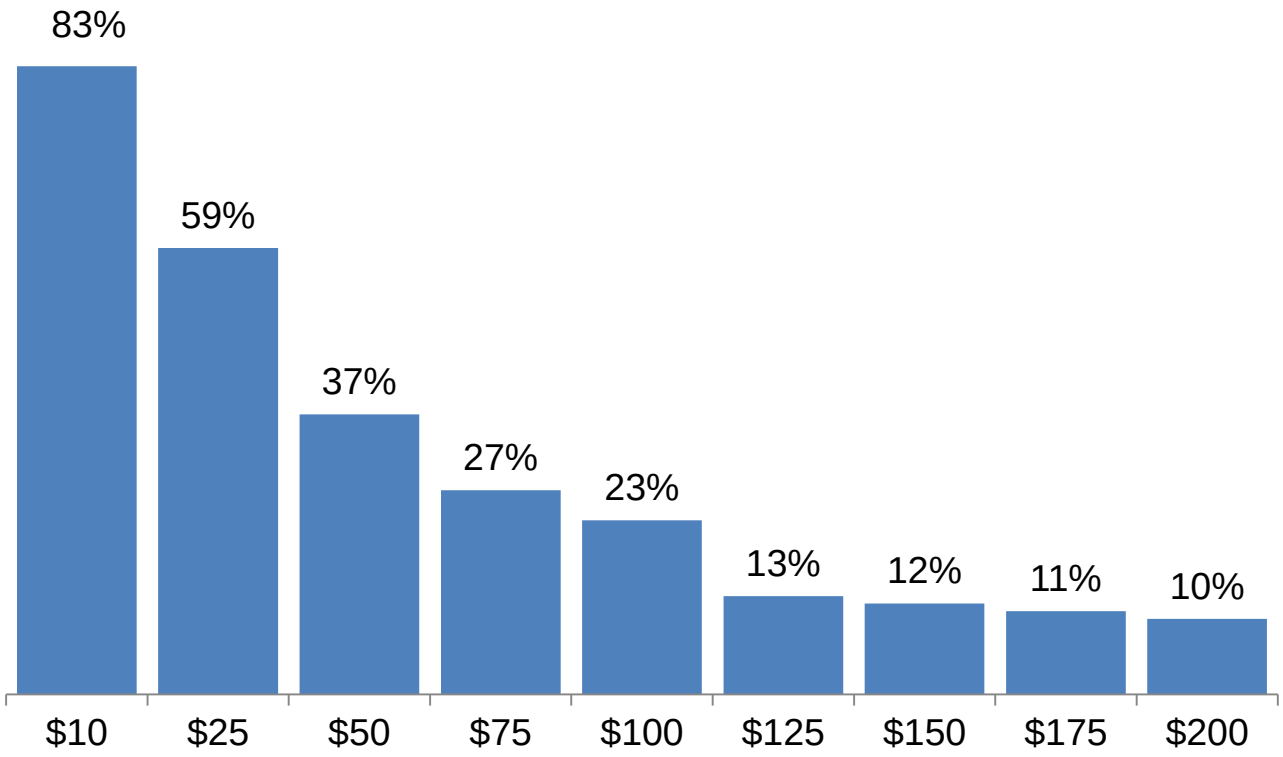
Attribution of responsibility for working to improve water quality



Perceptions of how well various groups are fulfilling their responsibility to protect water quality



Reported willingness to pay additional taxes/fees annually to improve water quality in Iowa



Subgroup Analysis - Key Findings

- Women, lower income households, residents of towns/cities & those who like to fish were more likely than others to hold attitudes in support of water quality protection & program enhancement
- Younger Iowans, rural residents, those with self-reported lower or mixed levels of knowledge were more likely to report that poor quality drinking water was not a problem or was a small problem
- Lower income was associated with higher likelihood of concerns that problems with drinking water were a moderate or very big problem
- Women and older residents were more likely than men and younger residents to perceive water quality in lakes, rivers & creeks as a moderate or very big problem

Conclusions

Majority of Iowans are satisfied with water quality in their area

Almost 60% rate their (unfiltered) home drinking water as good or excellent

About half of Iowans say that the waterways are about the same as 10 years ago – about 30% report they are getting worse

Agricultural runoff is viewed as the top threat to water quality

80% of Iowans recognize nitrates and phosphates as water pollutants

Conclusions

The majority of Iowans report using waterways for recreation in the past two years

Just over half of Iowans report having heard/seen information about water quality in their community

The majority of Iowans did not report being involved in environmental volunteering focused on water

Iowans view improvement of water quality as a shared responsibility

A large majority of Iowans indicate a willingness to pay additional taxes/fees to improve water quality

Thank you!

Questions?

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