

Public Perception of State Fish & Wildlife Agencies



Introduction

Background

To effectively manage fish and wildlife resources, state agencies must understand the perceptions of all stakeholders and not just those who buy a license. In October 2023, on behalf of 12 states within the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA), a survey was fielded to recreational license holders and to a general population panel inquiring about several major topics, including:

1. How relevant their state fish and wildlife agency is to them
2. How important are the various responsibilities handled by their state fish and wildlife agency
3. How well the agency was doing fulfilling these tasks
4. How the agency should be funded, and more

These results reflect the opinions and perceptions of the survey respondents, which may or may not accurately reflect state agencies' actual responsibilities, accomplishments, and needs. However, the public's perceptions of state agencies is their – and the state agencies' - reality. To the extent that the two view points do not agree, a need for increased engagement and communication exists. The goal of this project is to help state fish and wildlife agencies better understand how to engage and interact with the public.

Activity Groups

Respondents were split into three activity groups:

- **Licensed Anglers and Hunters:** These anglers and hunters were contacted using license records provided under strict confidentiality by each participating state fish and wildlife agency. Roughly 15% of the region's population is expected to fit this category. These people may also participate in other outdoor activities.
- **Other Outdoor Participants:** These are people who participated in at least one outdoor activity except hunting or fishing in the past three years. Approximately 40% of the population belongs in this category.
- **Nonparticipants:** The rest of the population, about 45% of the total population, fits this category and are defined as those who did not participate in any outdoor-related activity in the last three years.

Results are reported for each of these groups. On occasion the term “Outdoor Participants” is used to refer to licensed anglers and hunters as well as other outdoor participants collectively. When notable differences were identified by age, gender, race, or ethnicity, they are noted. The respondents were 18+ years of age.



This project was funded by the Multistate Conservation Grant #F23AP00489, a program funded from the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program, and jointly managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

Overview

Top Takeaways

- Roughly a third of the public does not know much about state fish and wildlife agencies, or cares to know. (See page 4)
- Most licensed anglers and hunters as well as other outdoor participants feel the agency shares their values; however, only 40% of nonparticipants feel that way. (See page 5)
- Younger people (18 – 34) are most likely to not know about state fish and wildlife agencies and hold negative opinions. (See page 7)
- Southeastern state fish and wildlife agencies have a fairly high level of public approval. Gaining public support for important initiatives may not necessarily depend on increasing overall public acceptance of state agencies but might rely more on increasing public awareness of the needs of fish and wildlife agencies and their importance to the broader public. (See pages 6, 13-15)
- While most hunters and anglers know how agencies are funded, almost half of nonparticipants do not, but they agreed that all citizens should benefit from agency actions. (See pages 16 & 19)
- One-third of nonparticipants did not support any new sources of agency funding and 14% said agency funding should be reduced. These findings suggest an important percentage of the population doesn't know much about their state fish and wildlife agency, does not support moving or creating new funding sources, and believes current budgets should be reduced. (See pages 21-23)

Other important takeaways plus recommendations regarding how state agencies can better engage with the general public are presented in the following pages.

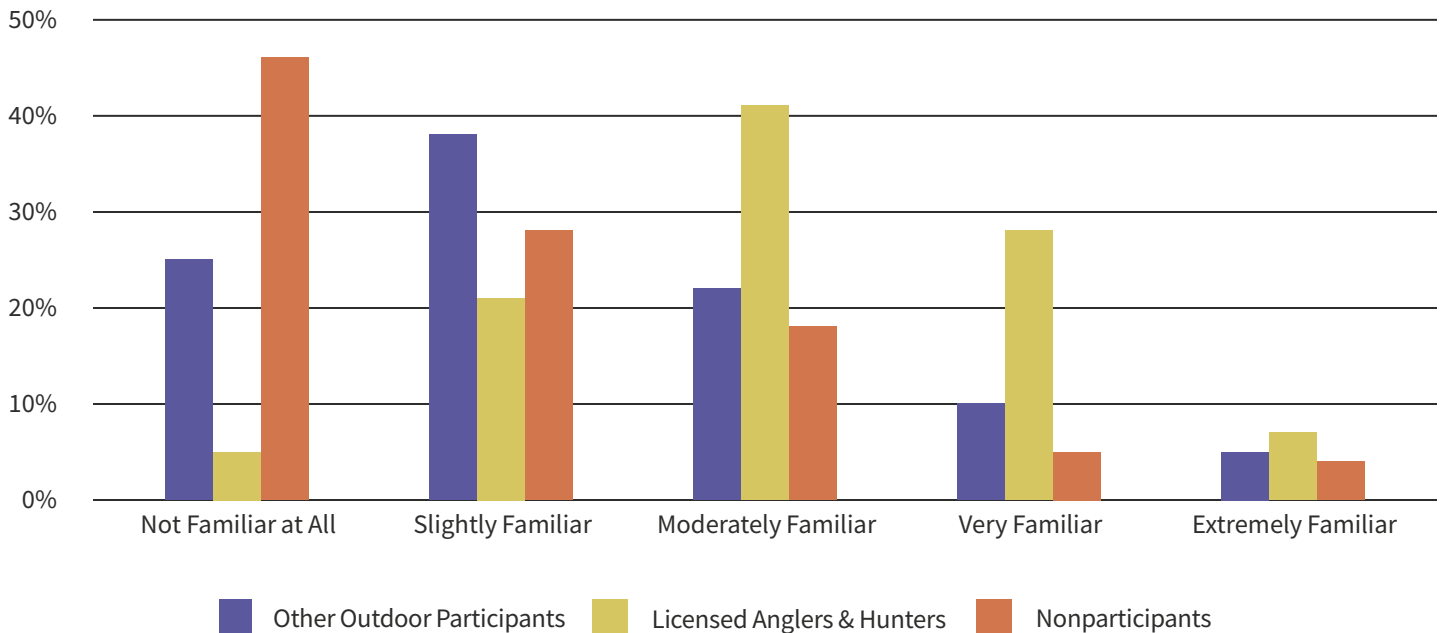
Technical Report

This is a summary of a much more detailed and documented technical report. Visit SouthwickAssociates.com for the full report and detailed results.



Agency Familiarity

Familiarity with the state fish and wildlife agency



Key Takeaways

- A majority of the public reports being at least slightly familiar with their state fish and wildlife agency, though 46% of those who do not hunt, fish, or participate in some type of outdoor recreation report no familiarity.
- Male outdoor participants were more likely than females to suggest they were “very or extremely familiar” with their state agency.
- African Americans were less likely to report familiarity with their state agency than others. Of all licensed groups, Hispanics were least familiar with their agency.

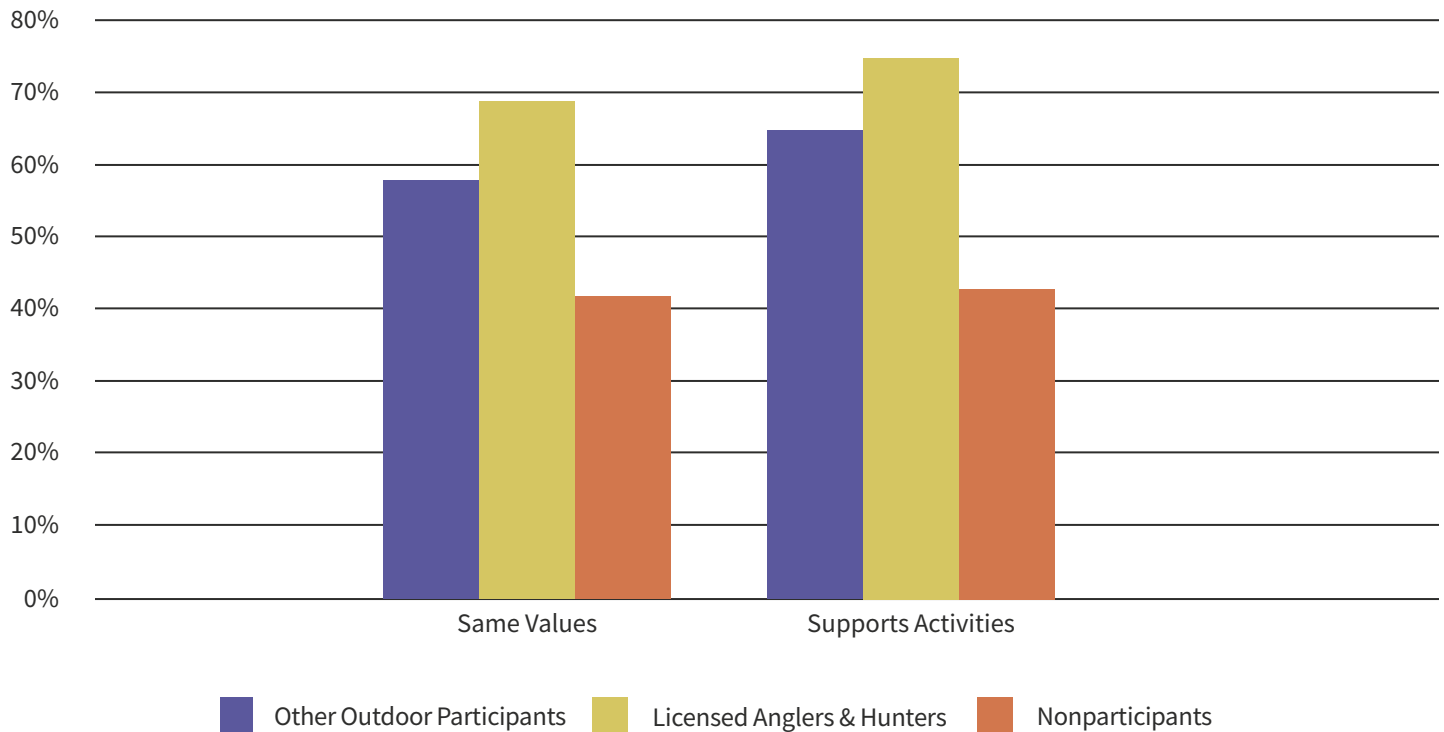
Recommendations

A majority of the public reports being familiar with their state fish and wildlife agency and trusts them to meet their responsibilities. Rather than focus on increasing familiarity, agencies may achieve better results by communicating their needs and limitations.

Roughly a third of the public does not know much about state fish and wildlife agencies, or cares to know. As shown later on page 23, many of these people also think state fish and wildlife funding should go to another use. Engage with these people, especially those who do not and likely never will buy fishing or hunting licenses. Communicate how fish and wildlife as well as management are relevant to everyone.

Agency Values & Support

Percent of respondents who agreed that their state fish and wildlife agency had the same values as they did or supported their outdoor recreational activities



Key Takeaways

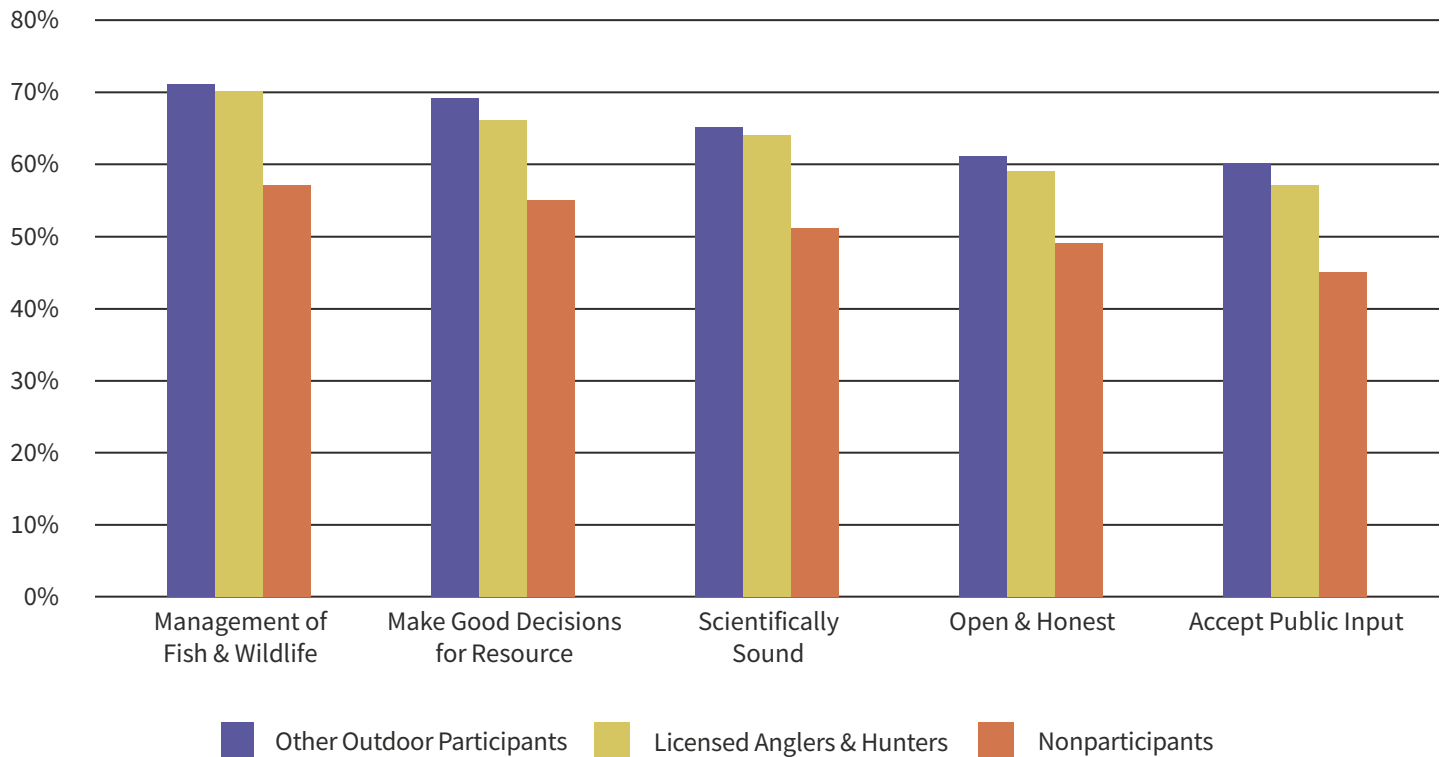
- Those who report being familiar at any level with their state agency, which is a majority of outdoor participants, feel the agency holds the same values as they do.
- However, 31% of licensed anglers and hunters, 42% of other outdoor participants, and 58% of nonparticipants feel the state's values conflict with them or they have no interest in the topic at all. Together, this group represents 48% of the public.
- Interestingly, a slightly higher percentage of all three groups supported agency actions, meaning some who think the state agency holds different values than themselves still support the agency's actions.
- African Americans were less likely to agree their state agency held the same values as they do.

Recommendation

48% of the public could potentially present opposition to agency needs and actions if they are not properly understood and engaged. Investments in evaluating their values and needs may be crucial.

Agency Performance

Percent of respondents who agreed that their state fish and wildlife agency does a good job with these responsibilities



Key Takeaways

- Roughly 70% of those participating in any type of outdoor recreation were aware of their state fish and wildlife agency and felt their state was doing a good job managing fish and wildlife.
- A lesser percent (57%-69%) thinks their agency meets other core responsibilities well such as making good decisions for the resource, being scientifically sound, operating in an open and honest fashion, plus providing the general public the ability to provide input.

Agency Performance (cont.)

Key Takeaways

- Roughly 19% to 25% of the general public either disagrees or is neutral regarding statements that the state fish and wildlife agency does a good job meeting its basic responsibilities. This indicates a potential need for the state to increase its engagement and understanding with core segments of the public.
- Compared to African Americans, Caucasians were more likely to state their agency was doing a good job, was honest and open, scientific, accepting of public input, and could be trusted to make good fish and wildlife management decisions.
- Fewer differences were seen between Hispanic vs non-Hispanic audiences, though Hispanics who do not engage in any form of outdoor recreation had low agreement rates.
- Receiving input from the public was scored lowest. Younger people felt less engaged. This may in part result from the communication channels and formats employed by state agencies, or indicate younger people feel their voice doesn't matter. Either way, more engagement with younger audiences may be worthwhile.

Recommendations

Younger people, aged 18-34, are more likely to be unaware of state fish and wildlife agencies and hold negative opinions of their agency. They feel less engaged and have high rates of no opinion. This may in part result from the communication channels and formats employed by state agencies. This demographic also tends to be urban where fish and wildlife issues are less likely to be a regular topic of conversation.

Use their preferred media to communicate how you benefit them. Show how their lives are better because of your actions. Get their feedback. This age group expects to be engaged. If you are not engaging them, your short and long term approval rating will suffer.



Agency Priorities

Rankings from respondents who thought the given responsibility was a “Very” or “Extremely Important” priority for agencies

Agency Responsibility	Other Outdoor Participants	Licensed Anglers & Hunters	Nonparticipants
Protect Environment	1	6	1
Protect Fish and Wildlife Habitat	2	1	2
Protect Game Animals	3	2	4
Enforce Game Laws	4	5	6
Control Pollution	5	7	3
Protect Non-game Animals	6	9	5
Manage Lands	7	3	7
Provide Access	8	4	10
Manage Nuisance Wildlife	9	8	8
Manage Urban Wildlife	10	11	9
Skills Education	11	10	11
Provide Technical Guidance	12	12	13
Boat Registration	13	14	12
Regulate Mining	14	15	14
Recruitment Programs	15	13	15



Photo courtesy of Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Tim Donovan

Agency Priorities (cont.)

Key Takeaways

- In general, other outdoor participants and nonparticipants rated activities that protect the environment and habitat first, then actions that protect animals, and finally actions focused on people.
 - In contrast, licensed anglers and hunters rated protecting habitat first and protecting game animals second, suggesting their priorities reflect actions that may improve their experience outdoors.
- Licensed anglers and hunters assigned greater importance to the tested responsibilities than others, indicating a greater passion for state agencies' missions and reflecting their comparatively greater engagement in public discussions about fish and wildlife management.
- In general, those 55 or older placed more importance on the listed responsibilities than younger people.
- Females were more likely to suggest that protecting the environment, protecting fish and wildlife habitat, protecting non-game animals, controlling pollution, and managing urban wildlife were of higher importance than did males. In contrast, males were more likely to suggest that recruiting new outdoor enthusiasts, providing technical guidance, providing access, and managing public lands were of higher importance than did females.

Recommendation

While African Americans participate in the outdoors in slightly lower proportions than others, they are engaged. Asians are another racial group that show engagement. Messages should focus on their shared values. Actions should focus on providing safe, convenient spaces for recreational activities.



Agency Priorities (cont.)

Detailed rankings from respondents who thought the given responsibility was a “Very” or “Extremely Important” priority for agencies

Licensed Anglers & Hunters*				
Agency Responsibility	Not At All Important or Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Very Important or Extremely Important	Overall Rank
Protect Fish and Wildlife Habitat	2%	7%	89%	1
Control Pollution	3%	8%	87%	2
Protect Non-game Animals	3%	9%	84%	3
Provide Access	3%	10%	84%	4
Enforce Game Laws	4%	11%	83%	5
Protect Environment	4%	11%	81%	6
Protect Game Animals	7%	12%	73%	7
Manage Nuisance Wildlife	7%	17%	72%	8
Manage Lands	8%	17%	70%	9
Skills Education	10%	19%	67%	10
Manage Urban Wildlife	10%	21%	62%	11
Provide Technical Guidance	10%	21%	61%	12
Recruitment Programs	15%	21%	56%	13
Boat Registration	16%	20%	54%	14
Regulate Mining	15%	19%	45%	15

Other Outdoor Participants*				
Agency Responsibility	Not At All Important or Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Very Important or Extremely Important	Overall Rank
Protect Environment	5%	13%	75%	1
Protect Fish and Wildlife Habitat	6%	12%	75%	2
Protect Game Animals	7%	15%	67%	3
Enforce Game Laws	8%	15%	67%	4
Control Pollution	7%	17%	68%	5
Protect Non-game Animals	8%	16%	66%	6
Manage Lands	8%	18%	66%	7
Provide Access	8%	19%	63%	8
Manage Nuisance Wildlife	8%	21%	61%	9
Manage Urban Wildlife	9%	20%	61%	10
Skills Education	11%	22%	57%	11
Provide Technical Guidance	12%	24%	49%	12
Boat Registration	13%	21%	49%	13
Regulate Mining	13%	21%	46%	14
Recruitment Programs	23%	26%	33%	15

Agency Priorities (cont.)

Detailed rankings from respondents who thought the given responsibility was a “Very” or “Extremely Important” priority for agencies

Nonparticipants*				
Agency Responsibility	Not At All Important or Slightly Important	Moderately Important	Very Important or Extremely Important	Overall Rank
Protect Environment	8%	15%	56%	1
Protect Fish and Wildlife Habitat	10%	13%	55%	2
Protect Game Animals	10%	13%	52%	3
Control Pollution	9%	16%	51%	4
Enforce Game Laws	12%	14%	50%	5
Manage Lands	10%	16%	50%	6
Protect Non-game Animals	10%	16%	47%	7
Manage Nuisance Wildlife	10%	19%	46%	8
Manage Urban Wildlife	11%	19%	45%	9
Provide Access	12%	18%	44%	10
Skills Education	15%	20%	40%	11
Provide Technical Guidance	13%	22%	34%	12
Boat Registration	16%	18%	35%	13
Regulate Mining	15%	19%	31%	14
Recruitment Programs	23%	20%	24%	15

*The percentages displayed do not sum to 100% as those responding with “No Opinion” are excluded.

Key Takeaways

- African American licensed anglers and hunters were most likely to agree that the various responsibilities were very to extremely important (on average 74%; overall average was 71% across the other races), whereas African Americans from the other groups (other outdoor participants and nonparticipants) were least likely than other races to agree that the various responsibilities were very to extremely important.

Recommendation

Considering that some of the tested responsibilities are not actual responsibilities for most state fish and wildlife agencies, such as pollution control and mining regulation, public education regarding agencies’ actual duties may be warranted. In some cases, specific audiences highly rated such responsibilities. For example, African Americans stated pollution control was one of the most important responsibilities for state fish and wildlife agencies.



Agency Decisions

Rankings from respondents regarding if agencies can be trusted to make good decisions

Trust Agency Decisions Regarding...	Other Outdoor Participants	Licensed Anglers & Hunters	Nonparticipants
Protect Environment	1	2	1
Protect Fish and Wildlife Habitat	2	1	3
Protect Game Animals	3	3	2
Enforce Game Laws	4	5	7
Control Pollution	5	4	6
Protect Non-game Animals	6	8	10
Manage Lands	7	9	4
Provide Access	8	7	8
Manage Nuisance Wildlife	9	10	5
Manage Urban Wildlife	10	6	13
Skills Education	11	14	9
Provide Technical Guidance	12	11	12
Boat Registration	13	12	11
Regulate Mining	14	15	15
Recruitment Programs	15	13	14

Key Takeaways

- A majority of the public trusted their agency to fulfill its responsibilities, regardless of what the responsibility was. Licensed anglers and hunters and other outdoor participants gave agencies the highest levels of trust in protecting fish and wildlife habitat, enforcing game laws, and protecting game animals. Agencies also received high marks in providing access and managing public lands. Other outdoor participants had slightly less trust in agencies protecting the environment and protecting non-game species.
- Licensed anglers and hunters were more likely to trust their state’s fish and wildlife agency to fulfill its obligations than were other outdoor participants. Nonparticipants were least likely to trust the agency though a majority reported trusting the agencies decisions regarding 13 of the 15 tested responsibilities.
- Those 55 and older trusted the agency more than did others, and those 18-34 years of age have the lowest levels of trust in their agency’s decisions.

Recommendation

Given people who do not engage with wildlife personally will be less compelled to seek out or pay attention to agency communications, increasing their trust and engagement will be challenging. The first step will be to raise awareness of the benefits and importance of wildlife to all Americans, a challenging task in itself.

Agency Decisions (cont.)

Detailed rankings from respondents regarding if agencies can be trusted to make good decisions

Licensed Anglers & Hunters				
Trust Agency Decisions Regarding...	Strongly Disagree or Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree or Strongly Agree	Overall Rank
Protect Fish and Wildlife Habitat	7%	11%	82%	1
Manage Urban Wildlife	8%	11%	81%	2
Enforce Game Laws	9%	11%	80%	3
Recruitment	7%	13%	80%	4
Boat Registration	8%	13%	79%	5
Regulate Mining	5%	20%	75%	6
Provide Access	6%	20%	74%	7
Control Pollution	8%	18%	74%	8
Protect Game Animals	6%	22%	72%	9
Skills Education	10%	21%	69%	10
Manage Public Lands	7%	25%	68%	11
Protect Environment	9%	23%	68%	12
Provide Technical Guidance	7%	26%	67%	13
Manage Nuisance Wildlife	8%	26%	66%	14
Protect Non-game Animals	8%	34%	57%	15

Other Outdoor Participants				
Trust Agency Decisions Regarding...	Strongly Disagree or Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree or Strongly Agree	Overall Rank
Protect Fish and Wildlife Habitat	7%	17%	76%	1
Enforce Game Laws	6%	19%	74%	2
Protect Game Animals	7%	20%	74%	3
Manage Public Lands	6%	20%	74%	4
Provide Access	6%	20%	74%	5
Protect Environment	8%	19%	72%	6
Protect Non-game Animals	7%	23%	70%	7
Boat Registration	7%	24%	70%	8
Manage Nuisance Wildlife	7%	25%	68%	9
Skills Education	7%	25%	68%	10
Manage Urban Wildlife	8%	25%	67%	11
Provide Technical Guidance	8%	28%	64%	12
Control Pollution	10%	25%	64%	13
Regulate Mining	9%	31%	60%	14
Recruitment Programs	9%	33%	58%	15

Agency Decisions (cont.)

Detailed rankings from respondents regarding if agencies can be trusted to make good decisions

Nonparticipants				
Trust Agency Decisions Regarding...	Strongly Disagree or Somewhat Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Agree or Strongly Agree	Overall Rank
Manage Urban Wildlife	6%	27%	67%	1
Enforce Game Laws	5%	29%	66%	2
Protect Fish and Wildlife Habitat	7%	28%	65%	3
Protect Game Animals	4%	31%	65%	4
Skills Education	6%	32%	62%	5
Recruitment	5%	32%	62%	6
Boat Registration	6%	32%	61%	7
Provide Access	7%	32%	61%	8
Manage Nuisance Wildlife	6%	34%	60%	9
Control Pollution	6%	34%	60%	10
Protect Environment	7%	36%	57%	11
Manage Public Lands	7%	36%	56%	12
Regulate Mining	9%	36%	55%	13
Provide Technical Guidance	10%	42%	48%	14
Protect Non-game Animals	8%	44%	48%	15

More Details

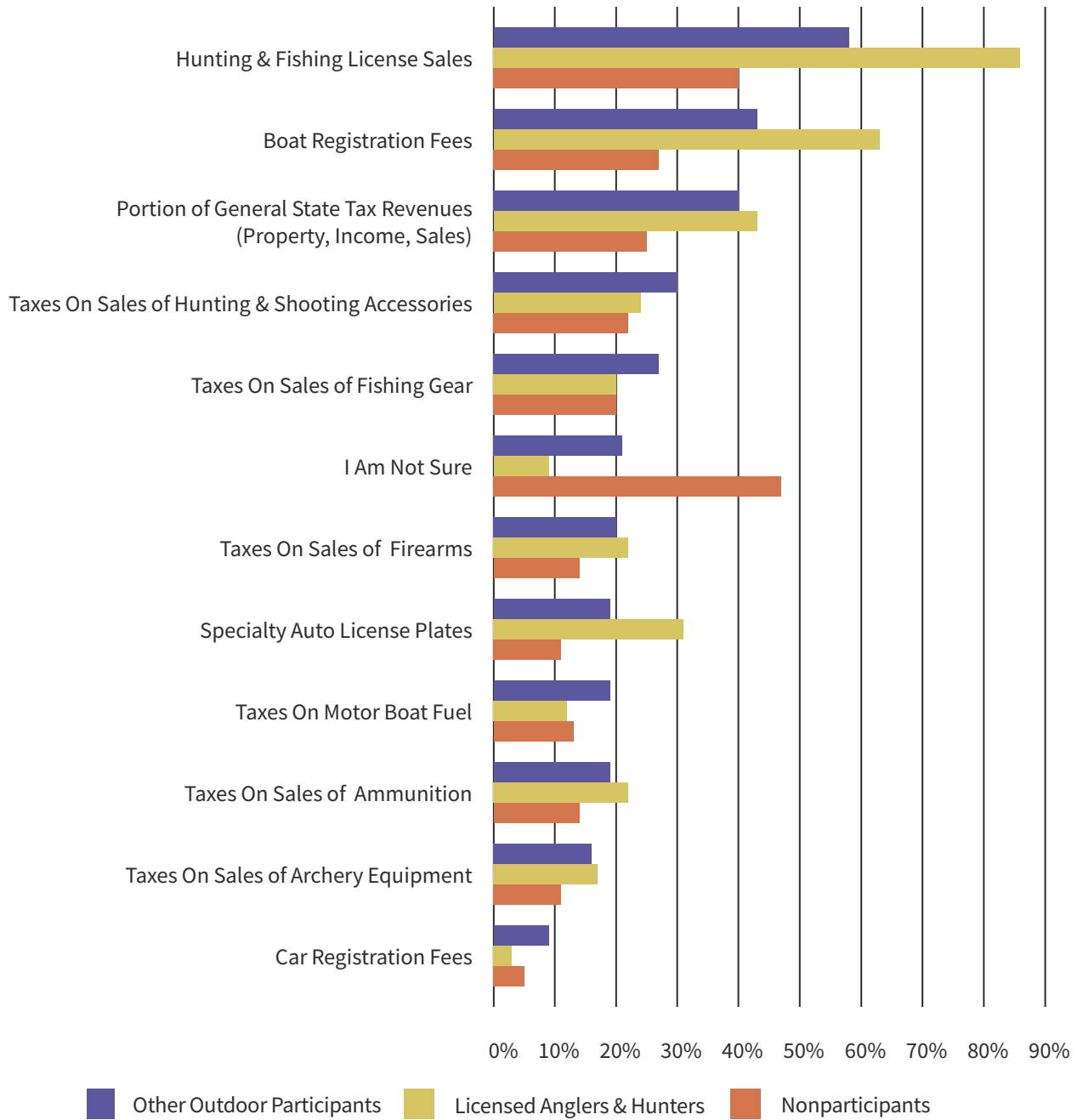
Details on the public’s priorities and levels of trust for each of the 15 areas of responsibility for state fish and wildlife agencies are within the full technical report available from SouthwickAssociates.com.

Recommendation

The various ratings and public feedback in this report indicate a fairly high level of approval and acceptance for Southeastern state fish and wildlife agencies. Gaining public support for current and future initiatives may not necessarily depend on increasing public support but might rely more on increasing public awareness of the needs of fish, wildlife, and the agencies responsible for their care.

Agency Funding — Mechanisms

People's opinions regarding how state fish and wildlife agencies are funded



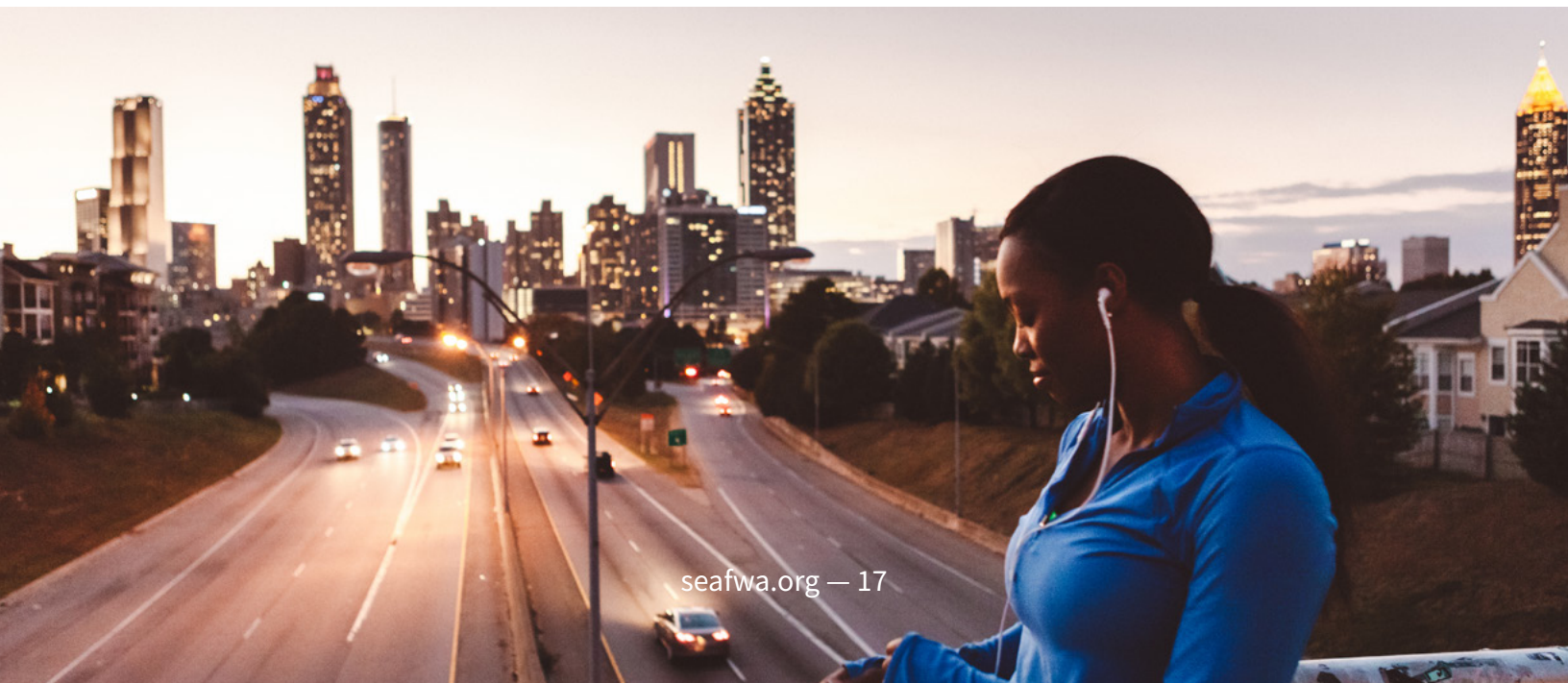
Agency Funding — Mechanisms (cont.)

Key Takeaways

- Licensed anglers and hunters were most likely to know that state fish and wildlife conservation funding came from a mix of license sales and other taxes. In contrast, almost half of nonparticipants reported they did not know where fish and wildlife funding came from. African Americans and Hispanics were least likely to be aware of state fish and wildlife agencies' funding sources.

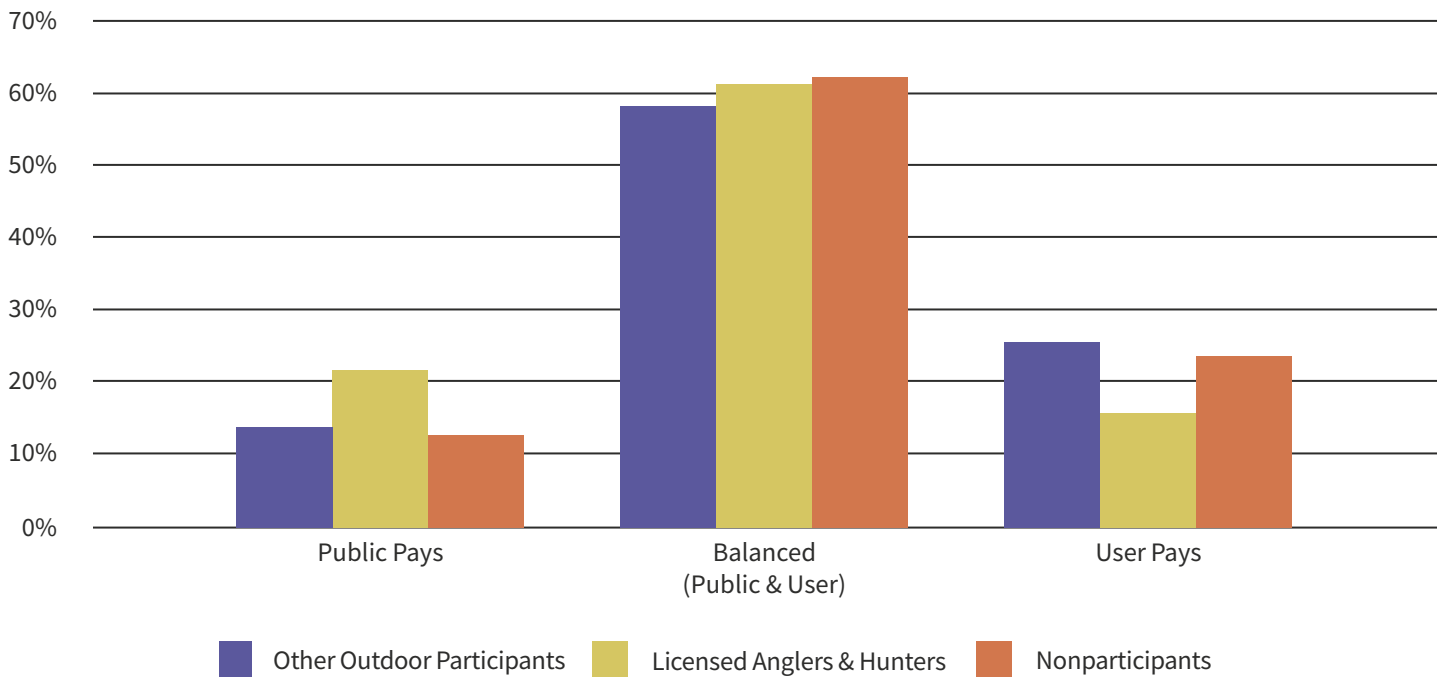
Recommendation

To more effectively engage with the general public in constructive discussions, raising awareness of how agencies are actually funded would be beneficial.



Agency Funding — Responsible Parties

Who respondents think should pay for fish and wildlife conservation services



Key Takeaways

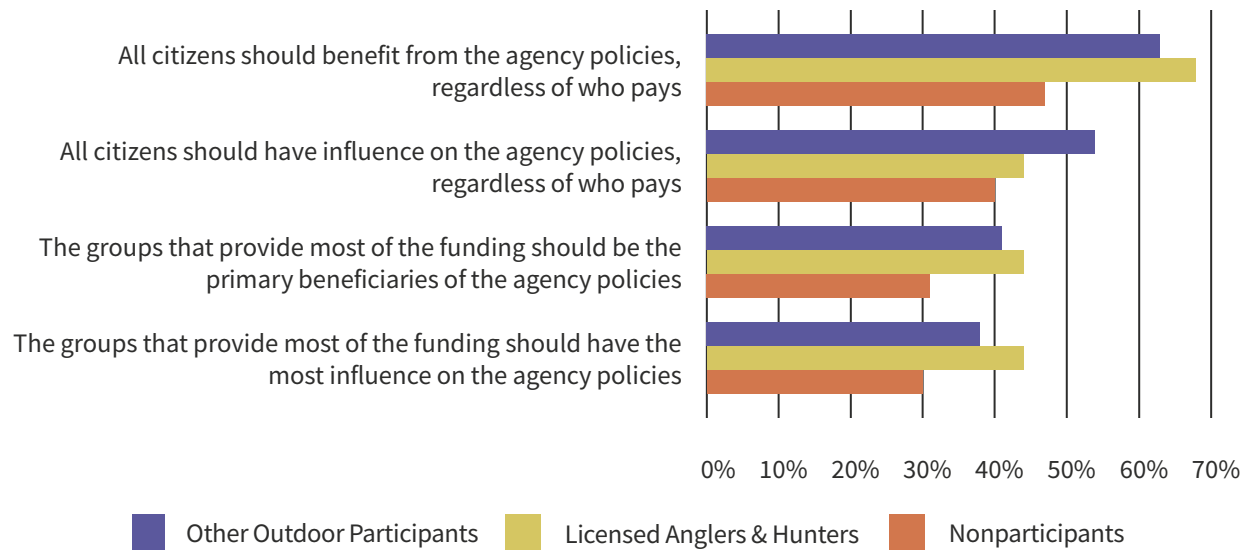
- While hunters, anglers, and target shooters provide most of the funding for the state fish and wildlife agency, the vast majority of respondents believed funding of the state's fish and wildlife agency should be a balance of the user-pays and the public-pays model. Not only that, but the balance should be essentially 50:50.
- People from all three groups 55 years and older were less likely to choose the public-pays option.
- Women were more likely to prefer the balanced approach while men were slightly more likely to choose the user-pays model.

Recommendation

The majority of the public – including licensed anglers and hunters – believe agency funding should be a 50:50 balance between the user-pays and the public-pays models. This finding may be helpful in generating greater support of proposals for additional funding sources.

Agency Funding — Benefits & Influence

Who should have the most influence on state fish and wildlife agencies?



Key Takeaways

- Licensed anglers and hunters were the most likely to say all citizens should benefit from state wildlife agency policies, regardless of who pays.
- In general, among the three respondent categories, only a minority agreed with the statements that groups providing the most funding should be the primary beneficiaries or have the most influence on state fish and wildlife agency policies.
- Differences in opinion regarding who should have the greatest influence were minimal when comparing responses by age, race, ethnicity, and gender. However, male licensed anglers and hunters were more likely to agree those providing funding should have greater influence and benefit.

Recommendation

In general, the three survey groups agreed that all citizens should benefit from agency policies, regardless of who pays. However, slightly less than half of nonparticipants agreed with this statement. This further illustrates the need to communicate the relevance of fish, wildlife, and agencies to nonparticipants.



Agency Funding — New Sources

Potential new sources for funds for state fish and wildlife agencies

Funding Source	Other Outdoor Participants	Licensed Anglers & Hunters	Nonparticipants
Voluntary conservation license fee for agency (e.g. \$5/yr)	1	3	3
Redirect a portion of lottery proceeds for agency	2	1	2
Redirect a portion of current sales tax revenue for agency	3	2	6
Mandatory conservation license fee needed to access your state public lands and waters for agency (e.g. \$5/yr)	4	5	5
Different allocation of current funds	5	4	4
Increase in vehicle registration fees for agency (e.g. \$5/yr)	6	7	7
Increase in sales tax for agency (e.g. additional 1/8 penny tax for every dollar spent)	7	6	8
None of the above	8	9	1

Key Takeaways

- Licensed anglers and hunters rank redirecting a portion of current lottery funds as their top choice, whereas nonparticipants chose “None” as their highest priority.
- Urban residents, especially those who were licensed anglers and hunters, were somewhat more open to new fees to fund state fish and wildlife agencies than were rural residents.
- The highest ranked sources of new funding that respondents thought agencies should consider were redirecting portions of state lottery or sales tax, or offering a voluntary or mandatory conservation license.

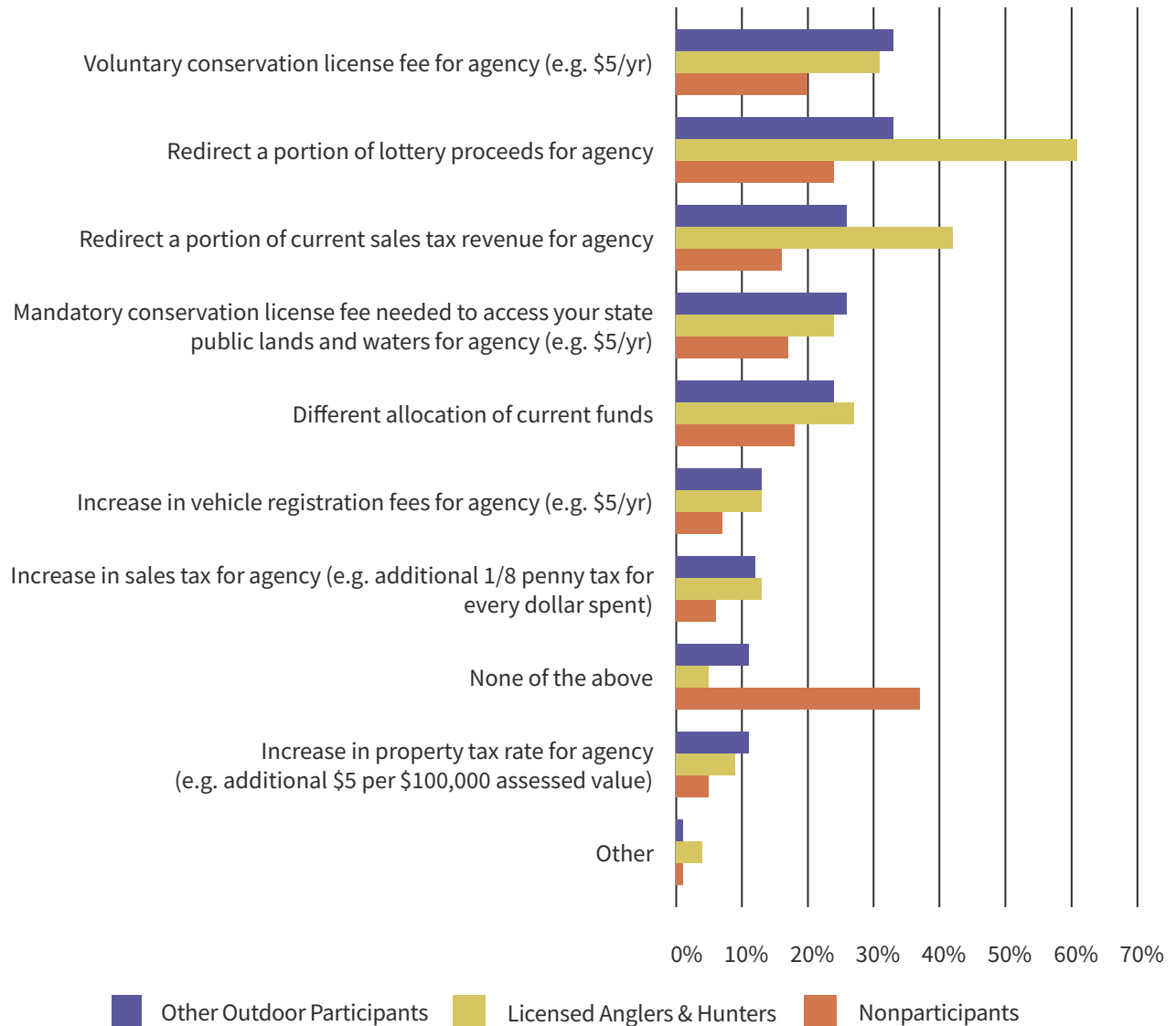
Recommendations

When raising public support for new funding initiatives, communicating the need and benefits to key audiences such as nonparticipants and older voters may be key.

Urbanites are a growing proportion of the population, and are most open to new fee structures. Illustrating how your agency’s mission serves the values of urbanites may garner more financial and political backing.

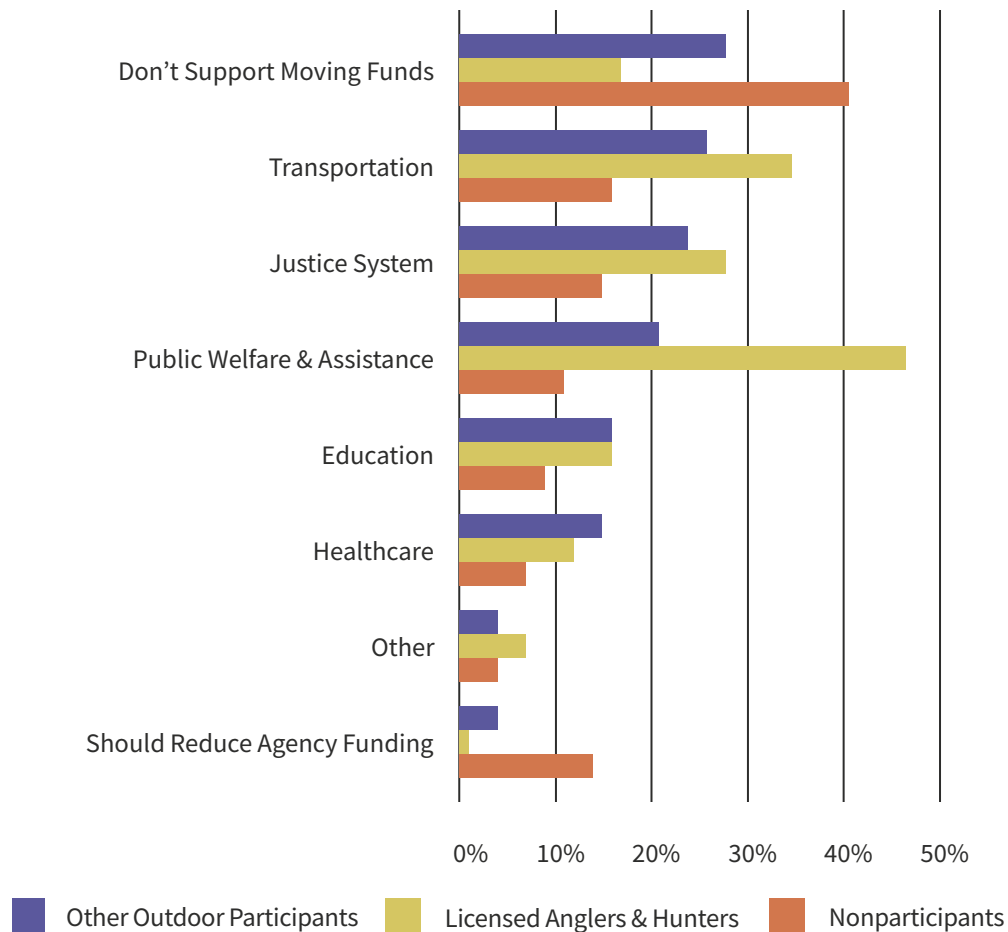
Agency Funding — New Sources (cont.)

Potential new sources for state fish and wildlife agency funding



Agency Funding — New Sources (cont.)

Which programs respondents would be willing to reduce to support fish and wildlife conservation



Key Takeaways

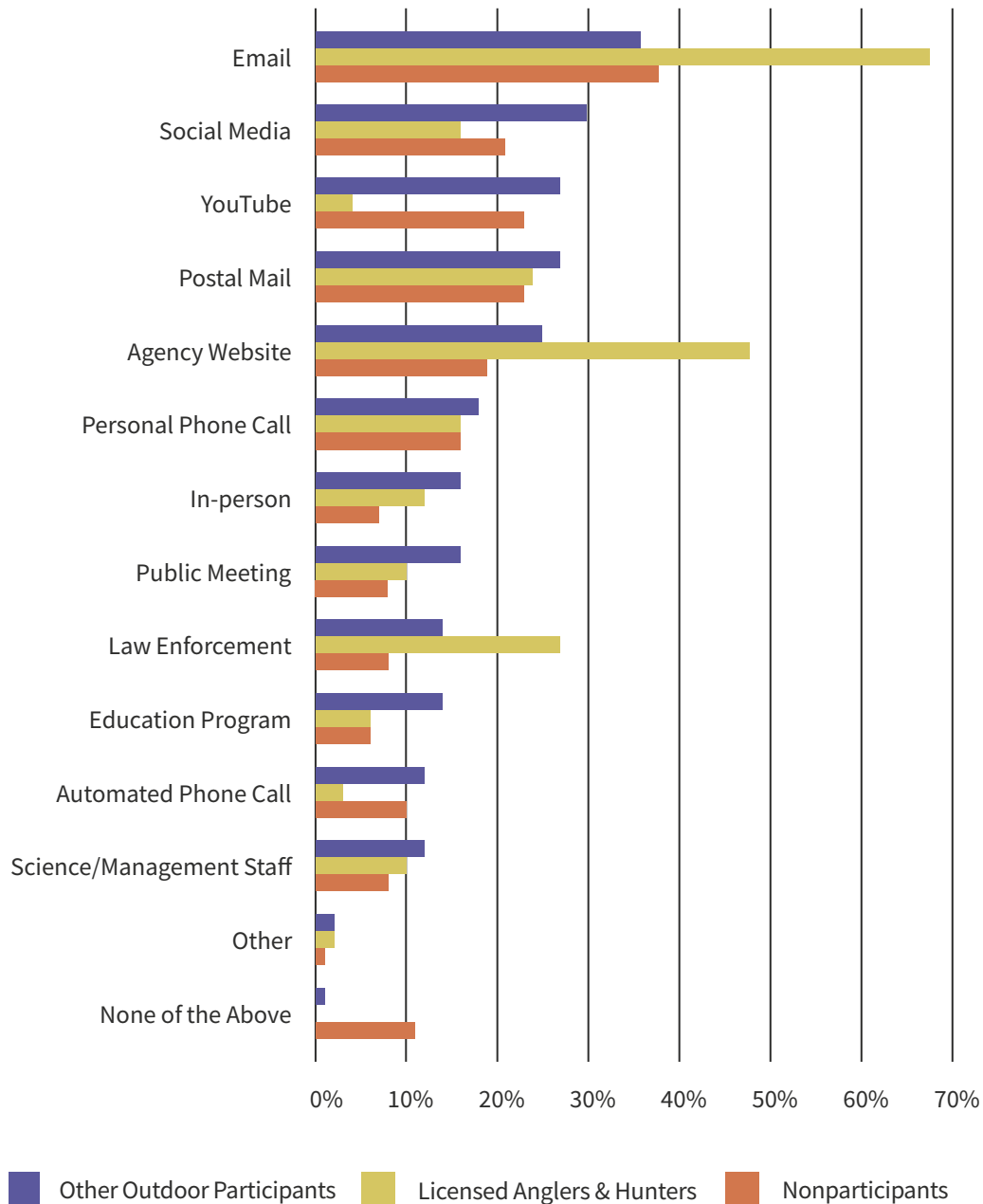
- A significant portion of people who are not licensed anglers or hunters (i.e., 28% of other outdoor participants and 41% of nonparticipants) say they did not want funds reallocated from existing uses to fish and wildlife, while the majority appear open to the idea.
 - Among nonparticipants, 14% suggested funding for state fish and wildlife agencies should be reduced.
- In contrast, most licensed anglers and hunters support moving funds.
 - Between about 30% -50% of licensed anglers and hunters thought states should consider moving funds from public welfare, transportation, and the justice system to fund fish and wildlife.
 - However, fewer supported moving funds from education or health care.
- Those 55 years old and older were more likely to suggest keep funding levels the same; whereas younger respondents were more likely to be open to moving funds from any of the other sources.
- Male participants were more likely than females to be willing to move funds from other programs into state fish and wildlife agency budgets.
- Licensed anglers and hunters were the only category showing high levels of interest in the suggested new funding sources. A majority of people who do not hunt or fish did not support any of the possible new funding sources.



Image courtesy of Mossy Oak

Agency Interaction

Most common methods for interacting with state fish and wildlife agencies

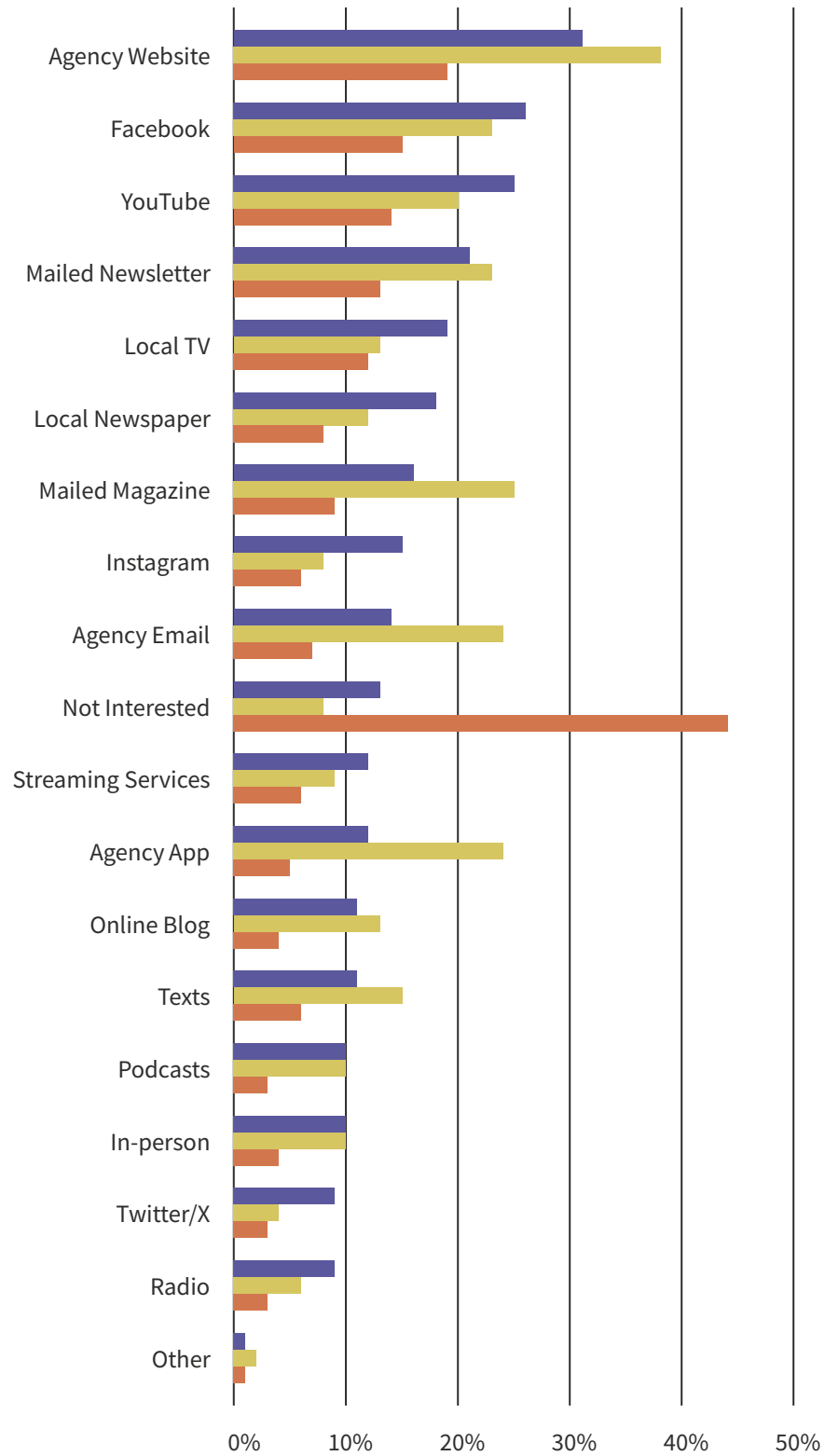


Key Takeaways

- Most other outdoor participants and nonparticipants had not interacted with their state fish and wildlife agency in the past year; whereas 70% of licensed anglers and hunters had engaged in either one-way communications (e.g., sent or received an email, visited a website), two-way communications (e.g., emails with responses, in-person conversations, etc.), or both.
- For all three survey groups email was the most common way they had communicated with the agency. Licensed anglers and hunters were much more likely to use their agency’s website or interact with law enforcement.

Learning More About Agencies

Preferred ways to learn more about state fish and wildlife agencies



Other Outdoor Participants Licensed Anglers & Hunters Nonparticipants

Learning More About Agencies (cont.)

Key Takeaways

- When asked about how they would like to learn more about the agency, both licensed anglers and hunters and other outdoor participants suggested they would prefer to visit an agency website. Facebook, YouTube, and mailed newsletters were also ranked highly for these two groups.
- In contrast, 44% of nonparticipants reported no interest in learning anything more, indicating a possible need to communicate the relevance of healthy fish and wildlife to all Americans.

Recommendations

State fish and wildlife agencies need to increase their use of social media, including Facebook and YouTube, if they are to effectively engage with people who do not buy fishing or hunting licenses.

The public truly expects to be able to go to their state fish and wildlife agency website to find the information they are looking for. Be sure states' websites are easy to navigate, that people can quickly find what they need. If websites are not easy to use, many if not most visitors will give up, resulting in lost opportunities for states to engage with the public and to win greater support.



Learn More

Get the full report at SEAFWA.org
or visit SouthwickAssociates.com



Graphic design provided by Alex Evans & One Desk Solutions, LLC — OneDeskSolutionsLLC@gmail.com

