

# **Great Lakes: Responsibility and Awareness About a Vital Resource**

## **Summary analysis of public opinion in Great Lakes states**

**Conducted for the Biodiversity Project and  
the Joyce Foundation**

**January 2003**

### **Overview**

A survey of 1,539 residents of the eight Great Lakes states presents a picture of a region in which residents place much importance on the Great Lakes as a resource to use and protect. At the same time, residents lack awareness about a number of threats to the quality and quantity of water in the Lakes.

The public throughout the Great Lakes region holds a strong sense of responsibility for taking care of the Lakes. This responsibility reflects a sense of pride in the Lakes as unique, vast, and vital to the region. Large majorities believe the Lakes are polluted and want to do more to protect the Lakes against pollution. On issues of water quantity and uses for Great Lakes water, majorities generally oppose exporting Great Lakes water and strongly resist thinking of water as a “commodity.”

### **Methods**

The Biodiversity Project and the Joyce Foundation asked Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS) and Research/Strategy/Management (R/S/M) to conduct a multi-phase research project to explore the connections, values, attitudes, and general knowledge which

residents of the adjacent Great Lakes states hold about the Lakes.

The survey of 1,539 adults was conducted by telephone from July 12 to July 28, 2002, using a random digit dial probability sample. The sample matches census numbers in its proportionality among the population of the eight states: Wisconsin, Minnesota, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and parts of New York and Pennsylvania which are near the Lakes. The margin of sampling error for the entire survey is plus or minus 2.5 percentage points.

## **Analysis**

### **1. Strong sense of personal responsibility for the Great Lakes**

Large majorities of residents espouse a sense of personal responsibility to protect the Great Lakes, and express the desire to do more to protect the Lakes. (See graph 1).

- Overall, 94% agree (67% agree “strongly”) that each of us has a personal responsibility to protect the Great Lakes. Michigan residents are more likely than residents of other states to strongly express personal responsibility for the Lakes (77% agree “strongly”).
- Nearly all, 96%, agree (78% “strongly”) that we “need to do more to protect Great Lakes habitats from pollution;” and
- Nearly nine in ten, 87%, agree (53% “strongly”) that we “need to do more to protect Great Lakes habitat from new development.”

### **2. Impressions of the Great Lakes: vast, vital, beautiful**

Residents view the Great Lakes as a source of great pride and a natural resource to use and protect. (See graphs 2, 3 and 4).

- These bodies of water are mostly considered: beautiful (74% say describes their view “very well”), vital to the region’s economy (70%), sources of recreation (63%) and relaxation (59%). Concurrently, the Lakes are thought to be vast (60%), and “one of the natural wonders of the world” (57%).
- Somewhat less prevalent but still sizable are the impressions of the Lakes as a non-renewable resource (53%) and vulnerable (45%).

Residents also recognize that the Lakes are not impermeable to danger.

- Seven in ten (72%) disagree (43% “strongly”) with the argument that “the Great Lakes continue to renew themselves as they have for centuries, so they are in no danger of damage.”
- Overall, seven in ten (71%) associate the Lakes with pollution and 17% strongly hold this view. Just under one in ten (7%) feels strongly that the Lakes are *not* polluted.

### **3. Residents see sewage waste and chemical dumping as major threats to the Great Lakes, but are less aware of other potential dangers.**

Of sixteen specific threats to the Great Lakes tested in the survey, sewage waste and industry dumping chemicals are seen by most residents as harmful to the Lakes, (79% and 86% saying “hurts Lakes a great deal” respectively). Residents are less aware of many other potential threats tested in the survey. (See graph 5).

Secondary threats in the minds of the public include:

- Low water levels (38% say “hurts Lakes a great deal”), invasive species (41%), acid rain (46%) and runoff from farms (34%).
- Air pollution, which is the leading cause of new pollution in the Great Lakes, was identified as a major threat by only four in ten residents (37%).

To a lesser degree, residents see global warming (27%), new construction of homes and businesses (23%), power plants’ use of water (22%), pumping groundwater (16%), commercial and recreational fishing (14% and 5% respectively) and recreational boating (8%) as hurting the Lakes a great deal.

### **4. Broad support for restricting water exports**

Residents of the region respond negatively to the idea of exporting Great Lakes water to other regions. (See graph 6).

- Majorities agree that we should not sell or export water from the Lakes “because this water belongs to residents of the Great Lakes” (64%) and because it is “the first step toward reducing the water supply in this region,” (69%).

Michigan residents express the anti-exporting sentiment most strongly (77% agree with not exporting water because it belongs to residents of the region, and 75% agree that exporting water is the first step toward reducing supply).

Residents are equally as protective of the Lakes when they hear arguments in favor of exporting water:

- Large majorities disagree that it is ok to sell and export water from the Great Lakes “because water is a commodity similar to lumber or oil” (70% disagree), and because it would “create jobs in the region” (69% disagree). More than four in ten disagree strongly with these two statements (46% and 43% disagree, respectively).

## **5. Values mix beauty and bounty**

When asked to rate reasons why they personally would care about protecting the Great Lakes, residents in the eight-state region were most likely to be motivated by a responsibility to future generations (64% “extremely important”) and the belief that the Lakes are created by God (58%). They also valued the Lakes as important place of natural beauty (55%).

Two other values that scored as important are: the Lakes serve to maintain the balance of nature that sustains us (54%), and the Lakes are part of our regional identity (52%).

Residents also acknowledge the economic value of the Lakes (34%), but it is less of a motivation for their protection than the intangible qualities of what the Lakes mean to them. (See graph 7).

## **6. Government water policies that restrict development seen as very effective more often than conservation measures**

The survey measured opinions on the effectiveness of a series of nine types of government actions to protect the Lakes: three proposals on development, four on conservation, one on selling water, and one on government coordination.

Residents are most likely to perceive restrictions on development as effective, followed by limits on water exports to communities outside the region. Conservation proposals that are aimed at changing consumer behavior and coordination efforts between governments in the region receive lower ratings for likely effectiveness. (See graph 8).

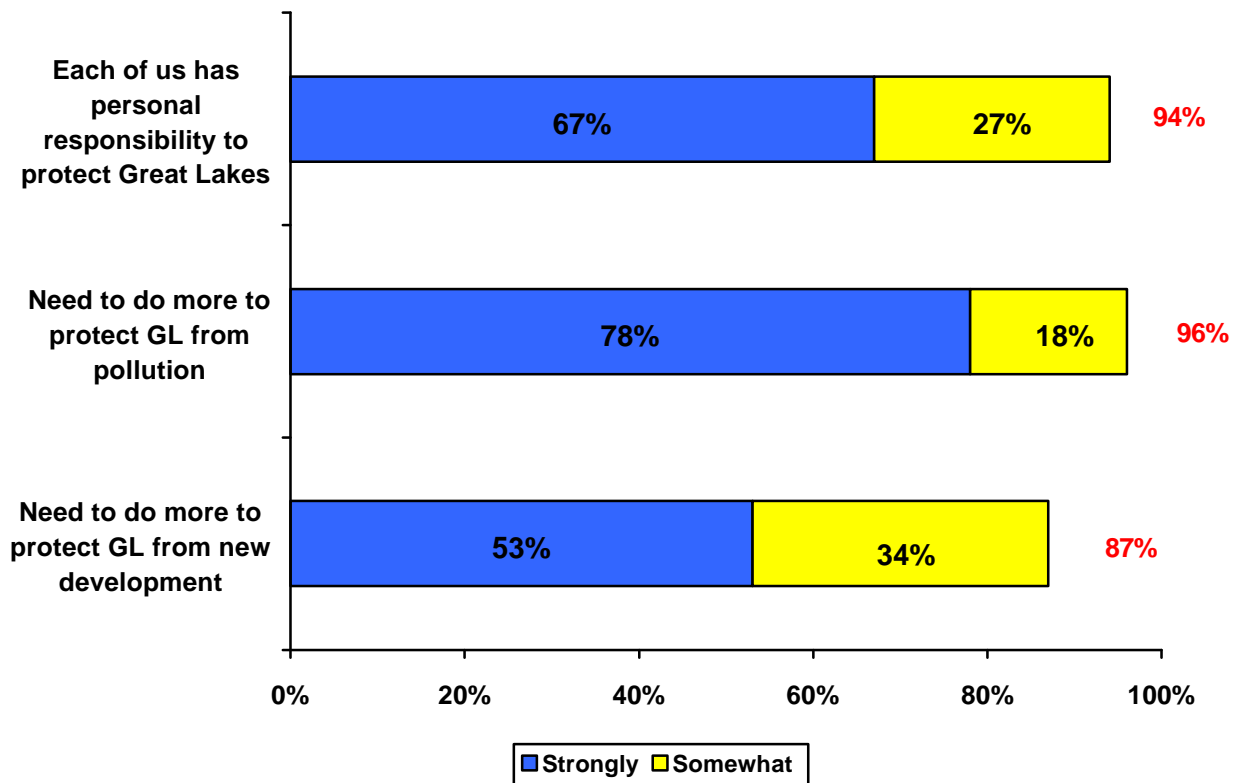
The four policies seen as most effective are:

- Requiring developers when applying for water withdrawal permits to demonstrate that the new demand for water would not interfere with current communities' water supplies (46% say "very effective," 86% overall effective).
- Not allowing construction of new homes and businesses on wetlands around the Great Lakes (46% "very effective, 82% overall).
- Limiting the quantity of water that power plants and other industries can withdraw from the Great Lakes (40%, 83%).
- Restricting outside communities from taking water out of the Great Lakes (39%, 80%).

In conclusion, residents of the Great Lakes region tell us their reasons for protecting the Great Lakes are as large as the Great Lakes themselves. Respect for the Lakes' God-given beauty, for their importance to the balance of nature, and the identity of the region all combine to create a broad sense of personal responsibility to protect the Lakes for current and future generations.

**Graph 1: Responsibility for Great Lakes**

% saying "agree"



Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements (Strongly or somewhat?):

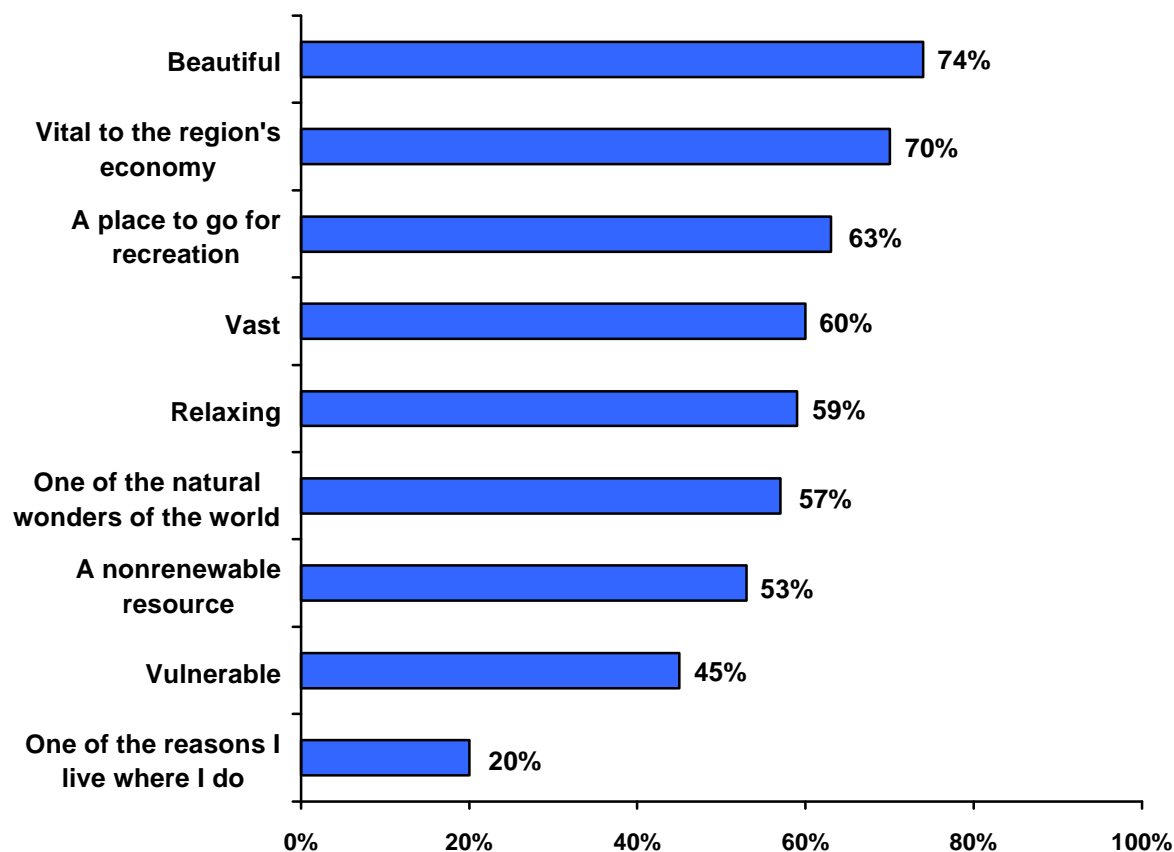
Q41. Each of us has a personal responsibility to protect the Great Lakes.

Q45. We need to do more to protect the Great Lakes habitats from pollution.

Q46. We need to do more to protect the Great Lakes habitats from development.

**Graph 2: The Great Lakes Are...**

% saying "very well"



Q. People use different terms and phrases to describe the Great Lakes. Please tell me if each of the following words or phrases describes the Great Lakes for you personally very well, somewhat, not very well, or not at all? The Great Lakes are...

Q7. Beautiful

Q13. Vital to the region's economy

Q15. A place to go for recreation

Q6. Vast

Q14. Relaxing

Q9. One of the natural wonders of the world

Q10. A non-renewable resource

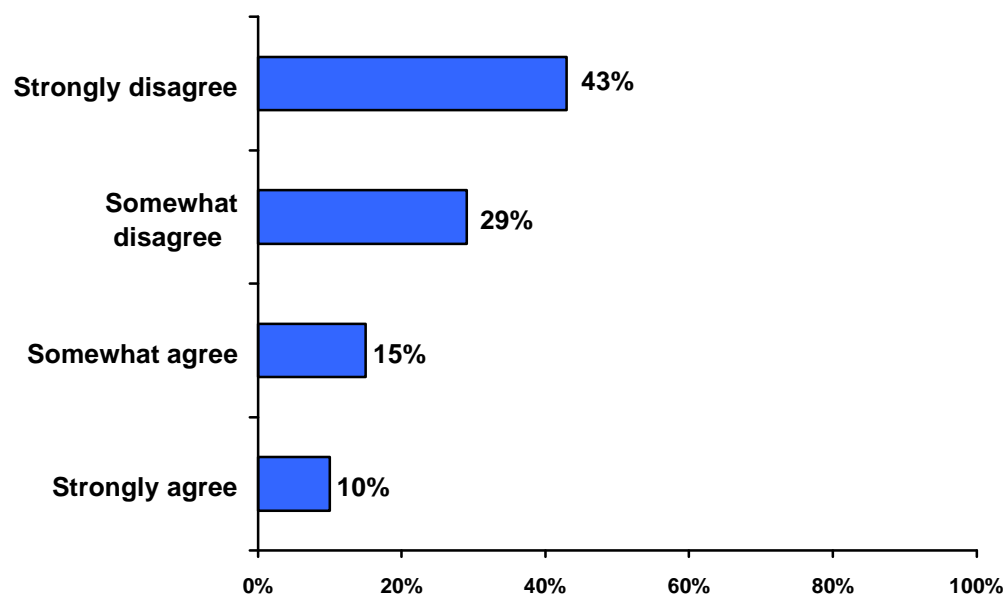
Q12. Vulnerable

Q11. One of the reasons I live where I do

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**Graph 3: The Great Lakes Continue to Renew Themselves**

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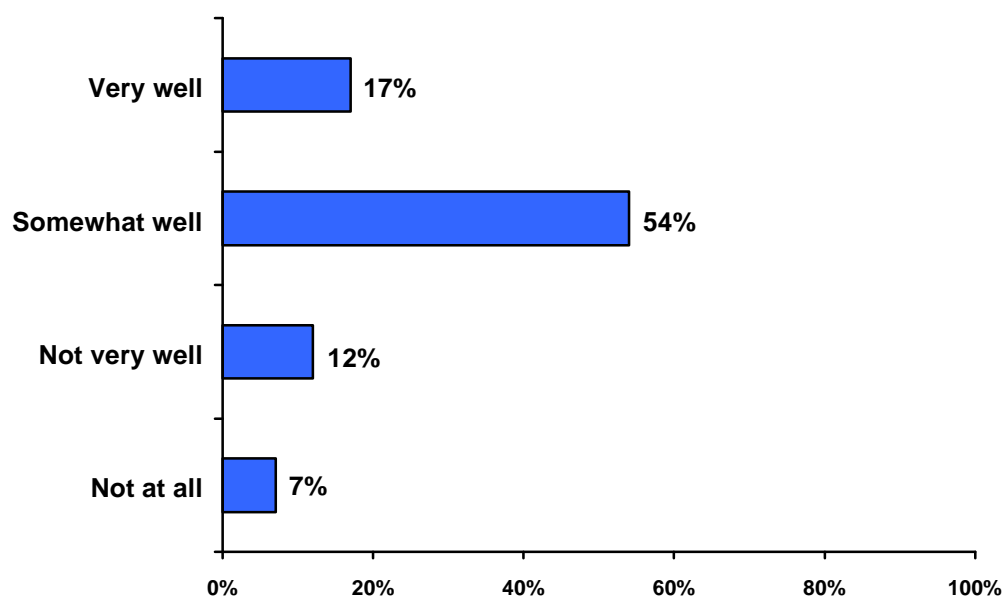


Q42. The Great Lakes continue to renew themselves as they have for centuries, so they are in no danger of serious damage.

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**Graph 4: Great Lakes Are Polluted**

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People use different terms and phrases to describe the Great Lakes. Please tell me if each of the following words or phrases describes the Great Lakes for you personally very well, somewhat, not very well, or not at all? The Great Lakes are....

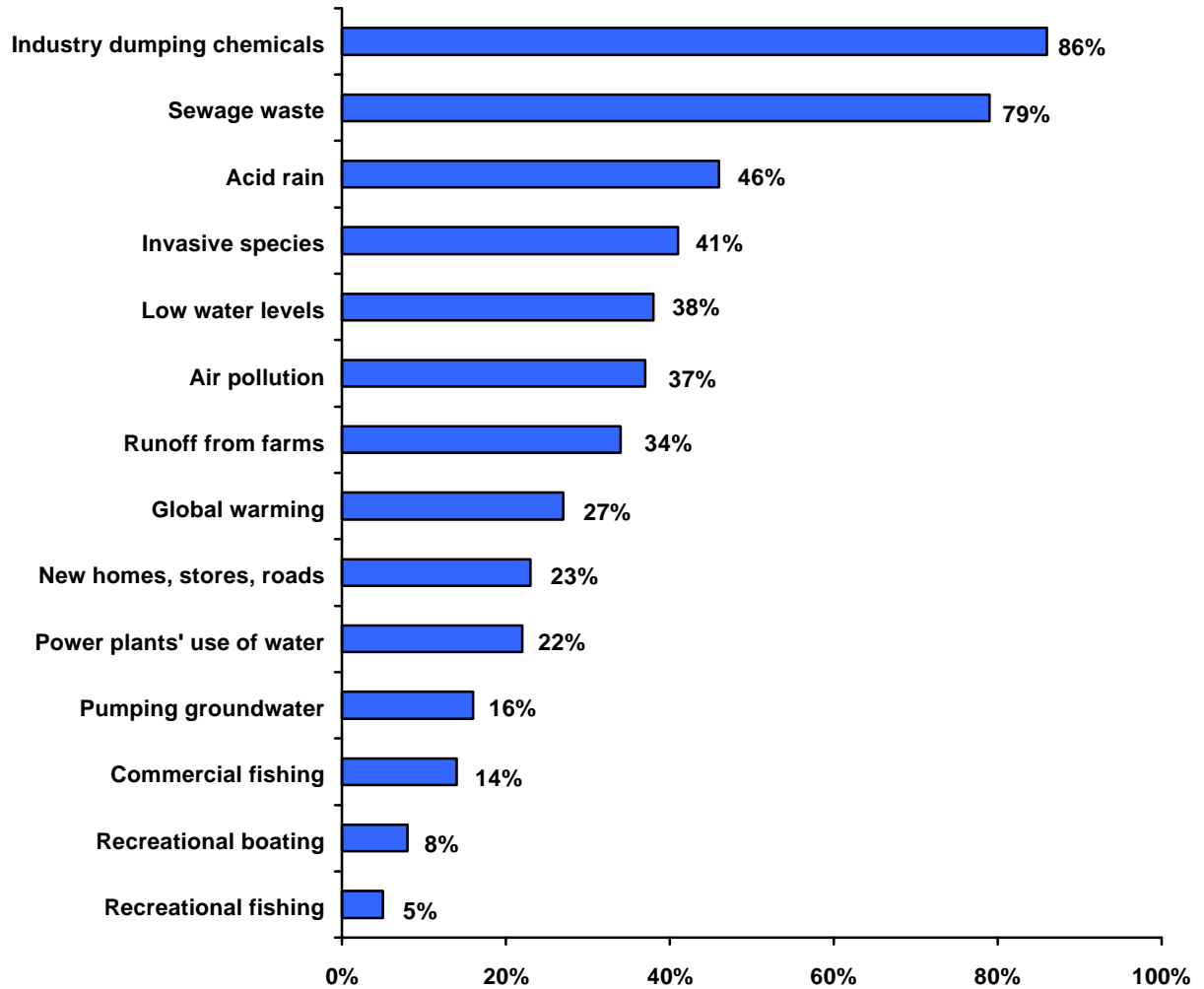
Q8. Polluted

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**Graph 5: Threats to Great Lakes**

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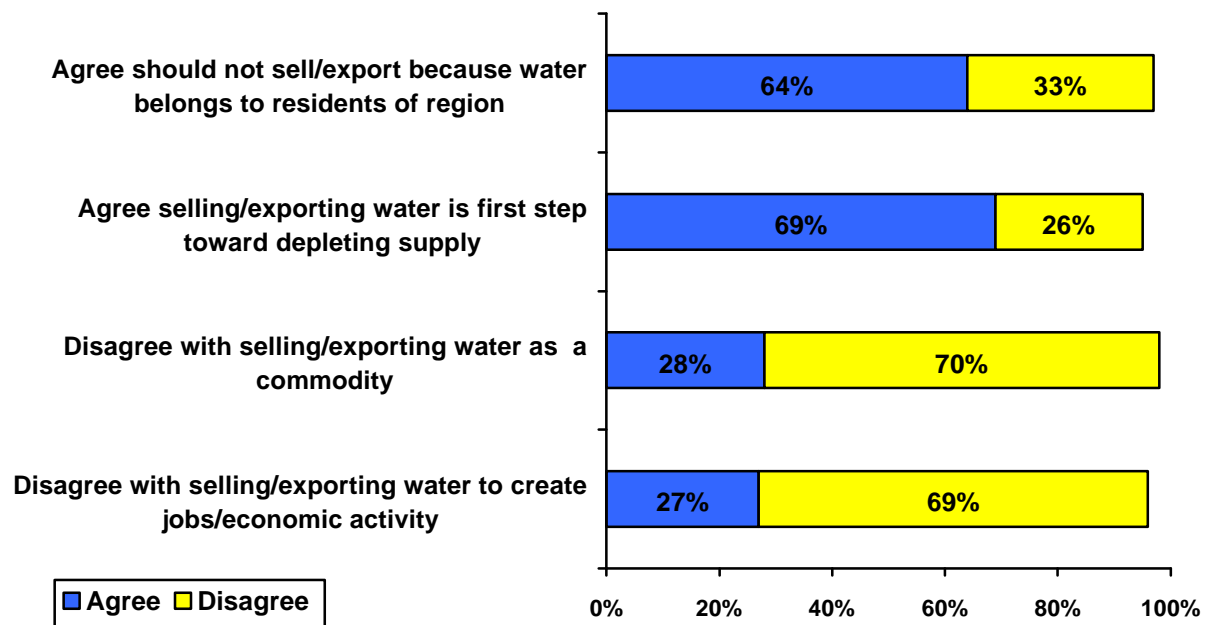
% saying "hurt a great deal"



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Q16-29. From what you know generally, does each of the following currently help, hurt or have no effect on the condition of the Great Lakes? (A great deal or somewhat?)

### Graph 6: Selling and Exporting Water



Now I'm going to read you a few statements about how Great Lakes water is used. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following (Strongly or somewhat?):

Q47. We should not sell and export water from the Great Lakes because this water belongs to residents of the Great Lakes region.

Q48. Selling and exporting water from the Great Lakes to other regions is a first step toward reducing water supply in the region.

Q50. It is ok to sell and export water from the Great Lakes because water is a commodity similar to lumber or oil.

Q51. We should sell and export water from the Great Lakes because this would create economic activity and jobs in the region.

### Graph 7: Values: Reasons to Care About the Great Lakes

% saying "extremely important"

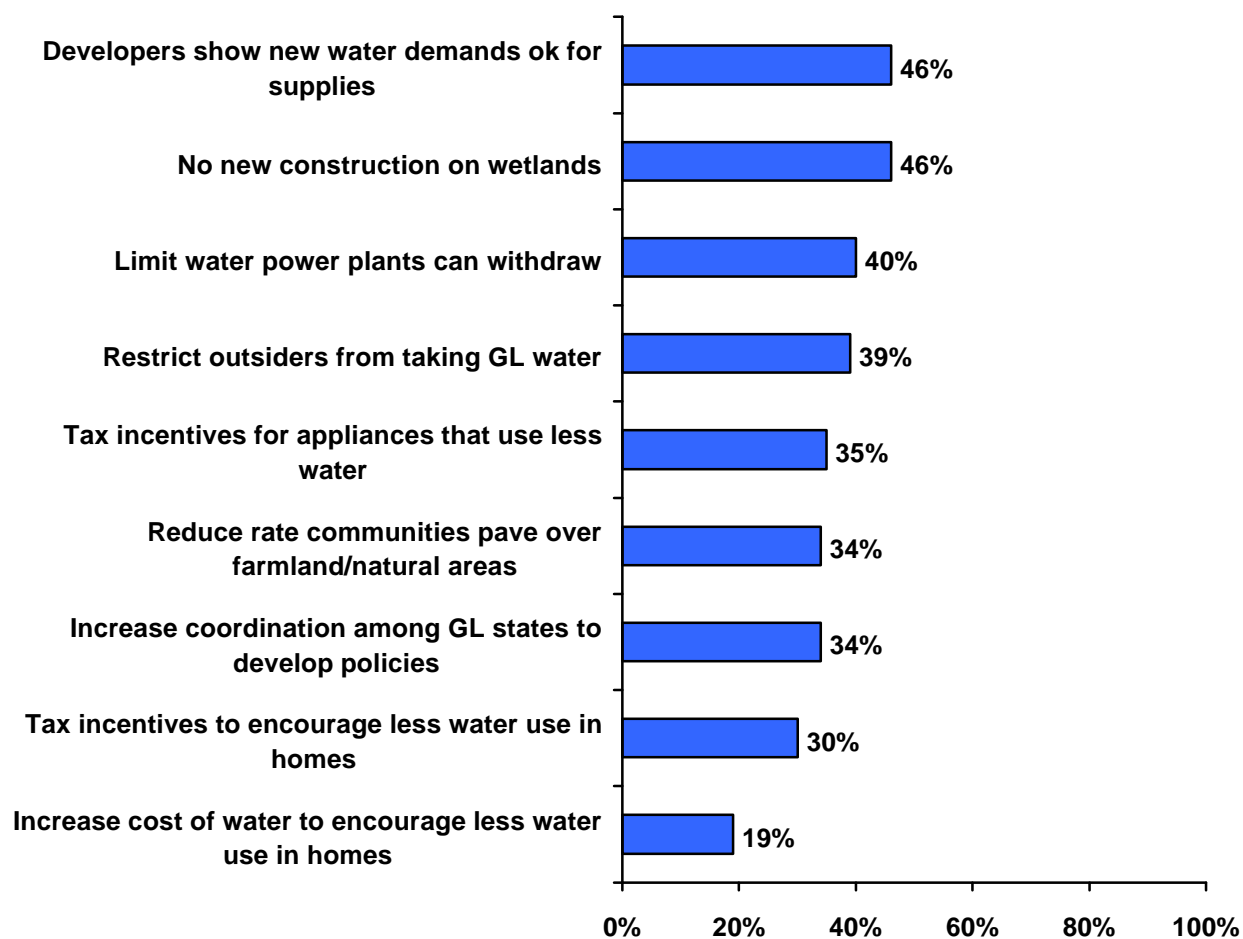


Please think of a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 means something is not at all a reason to you personally and 10 means it is an extremely important reason to you personally to care about protecting the Great Lakes: Here's the first one: How important is this to you personally as a reason to care about protecting the Great Lakes?

- Q52. We have a personal responsibility to leave the Great Lakes in good shape for future generations.
- Q56. The Great Lakes are God's creation, so we should respect them as God's work.
- Q54. The Great Lakes are important places of natural beauty.
- Q55. The Great Lakes are necessary to maintain the balance of nature in this region.
- Q57. The Great Lakes are an important part of the identity of our region.
- Q53. The Great Lakes are a key part of the region's economic vitality.

### Graph 8: Specific Government Policies Seen As Effective

% saying "very effective"



Now here are some types of actions that state and federal government can take to help protect the Great Lakes. Please tell me how effective you think each type of action would be to help protect the Great Lakes: very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, or not at all effective: Have the government...

Q31. Require developers, when applying for water withdrawal permits, to demonstrate that the new demand for water would not interfere with current communities' water supplies.

Q34. Do not allow construction of new homes and businesses on wetlands around the Great Lakes.

Q33. Limit the quantity of water that power plants and other industries can withdraw from the Great Lakes.

Q32. Restrict outside communities from taking water out of the Great Lakes.

Q38. Offer more tax incentives to encourage consumers to buy washing machines and other appliances that use less water.

Q35. Reduce the rate at which communities are paving over farmland or other natural areas.

Q36. Increase coordination among Great Lakes states to develop policies about the use of Great Lakes water, even if it requires giving up some of your own state's power in making these decisions.

Q37a. Offer tax incentives to encourage consumers to use less water in their homes. *Split sample, base N = 772*

Q37b. Increase the cost of water for households to encourage consumers to use less water in their homes. *Split sample, base N = 767*