



CORVUSCENTRE
for Conservation Policy

Conservation Easements in Alberta: *Perceptions and Practices*

Summary of a Corvus Centre Research Project



The Corvus Centre for Conservation Policy



CORVUSCENTRE
for Conservation Policy

corvus.ca

We are a Canadian nature conservation research
charity based in Calgary, AB

We help government, NGOs, and others
to develop and implement
nature-positive policy

We do this through research, facilitation, and
knowledge transfer

Private Land Conservation Research and Communications Project

This project was made possible through the generous support of



Private Land Conservation Research and Communications Project



- Private Land Conservation and Species at Risk Ranges
- **Area-based Conservation** and Land Trusts
- Conservation Easement Explainer Series
- Siting of Renewables on Conserved Land
- Conservation Easement vs Fee Simple Selection Factors
- Conservation Easement Guide for Local Governments
- Conservation Easement Guide for Real Estate Professionals
- Conservation Easement Financial Estimator
- Private Land Conservation and Carbon Finance

Outline

- Why this research?
- What did we ask?
- What did we find?
- What does this tell us?
- Where is the report?

Why this research?



WHY THIS RESEARCH?

Agricultural producer perspective

‘Conservation-
Motivated’



WHY THIS RESEARCH?

Agricultural
producer
perspective



‘Transaction-
Motivated’

WHY THIS RESEARCH?

Agricultural producer perspective



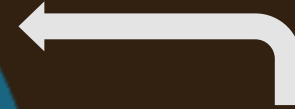
WHY THIS RESEARCH?

Agricultural producer perspective

More
Conservation
Motivated



Transaction
Motivated

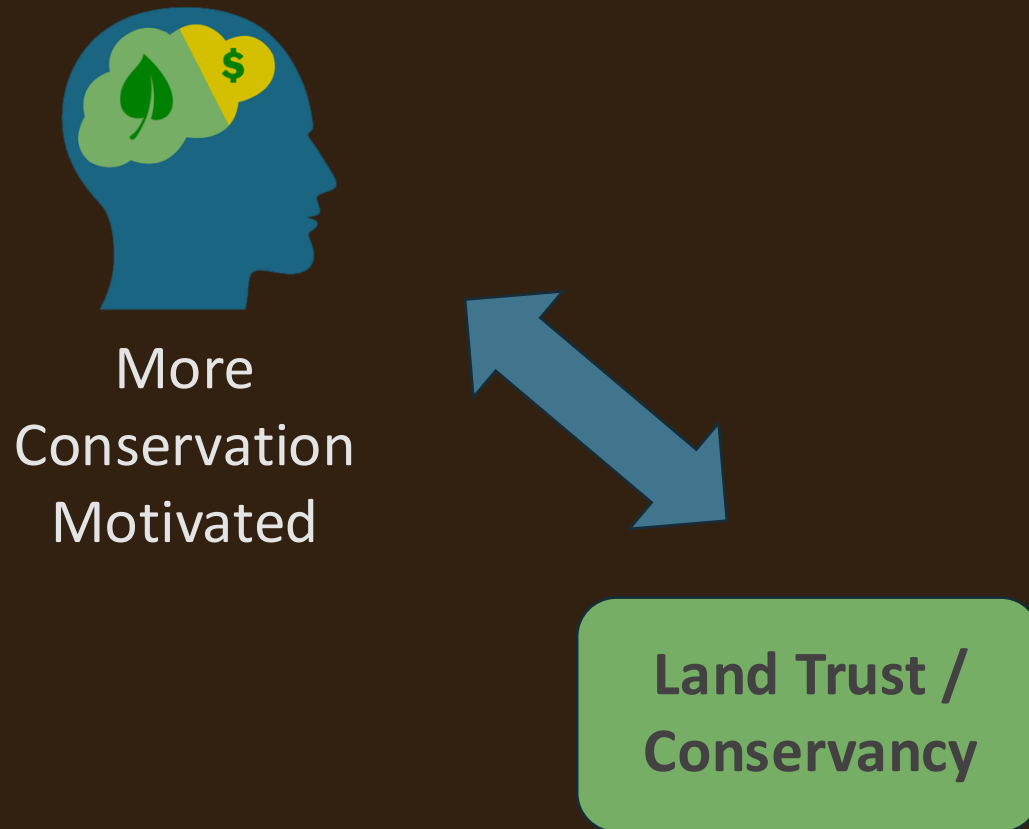


WHY THIS RESEARCH?

Agricultural producer perspective

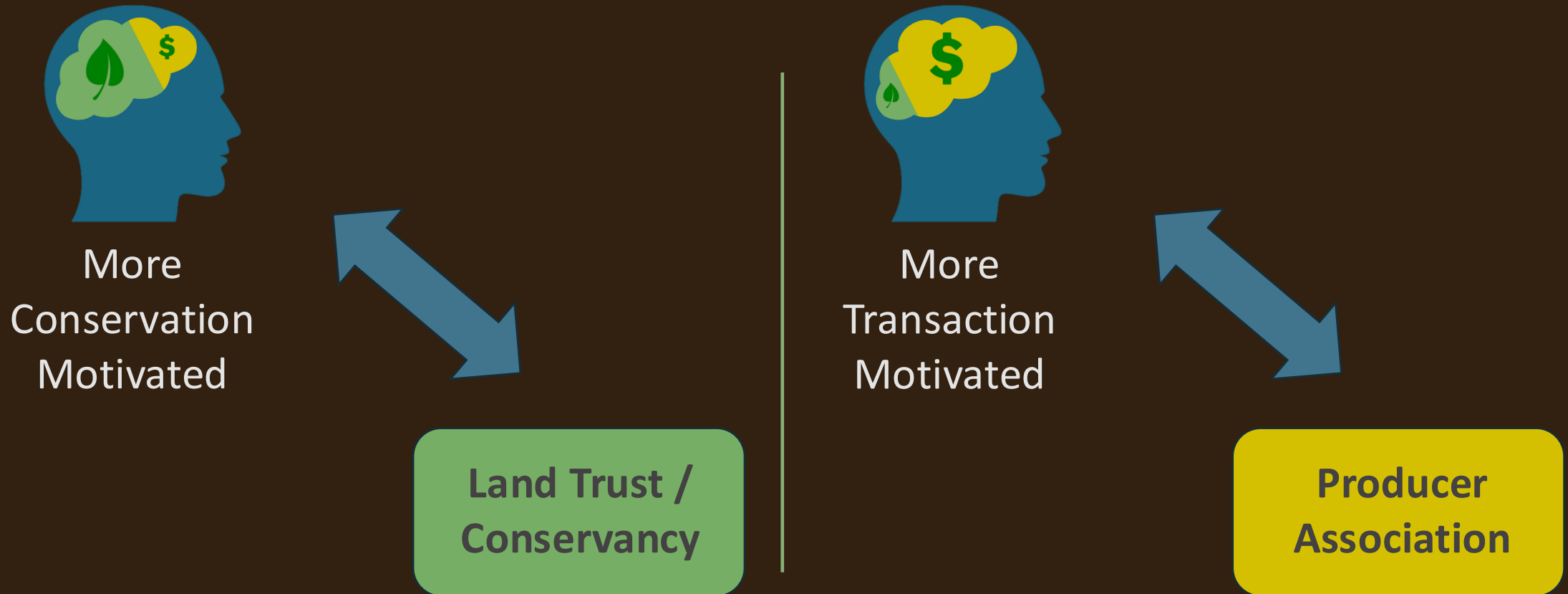


Conversations with agricultural producers



WHY THIS RESEARCH?

Conversations with agricultural producers



Researching Agricultural Producer Motivations

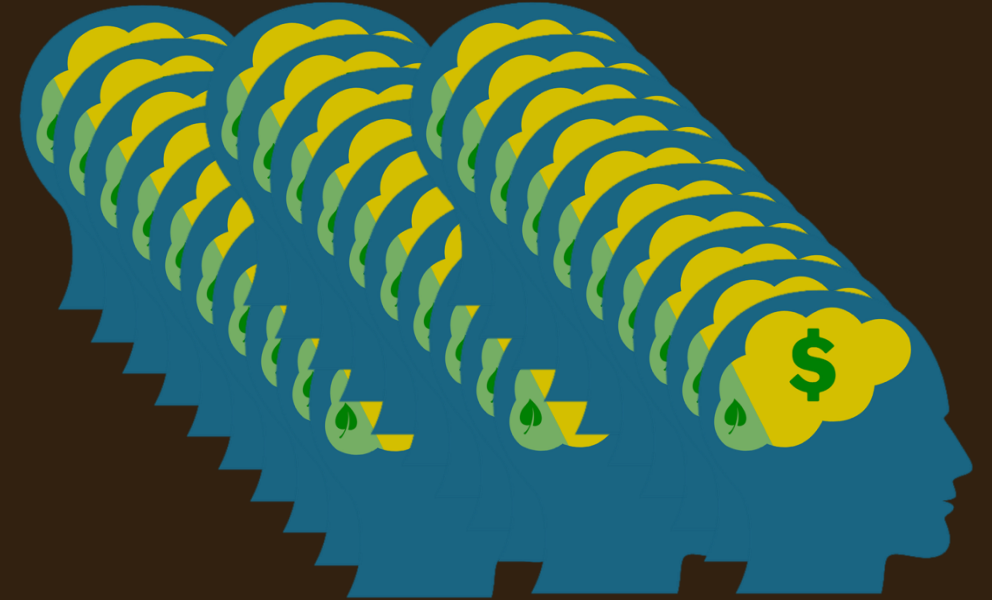


More
Conservation Motivated

Researching Agricultural Producer Motivations



More
Conservation Motivated



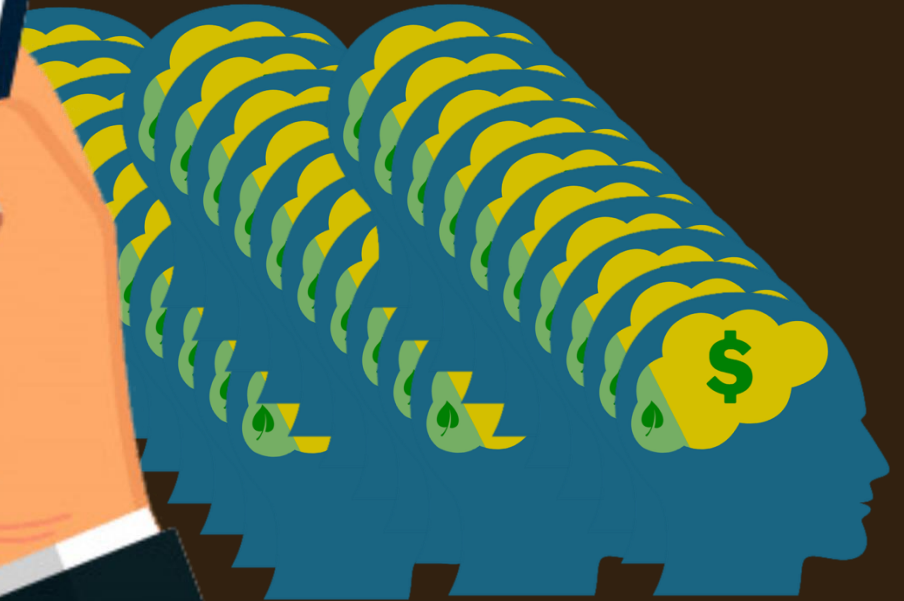
More
Transaction Motivated

WHY THIS RESEARCH?

Researching Agricultural Landowners

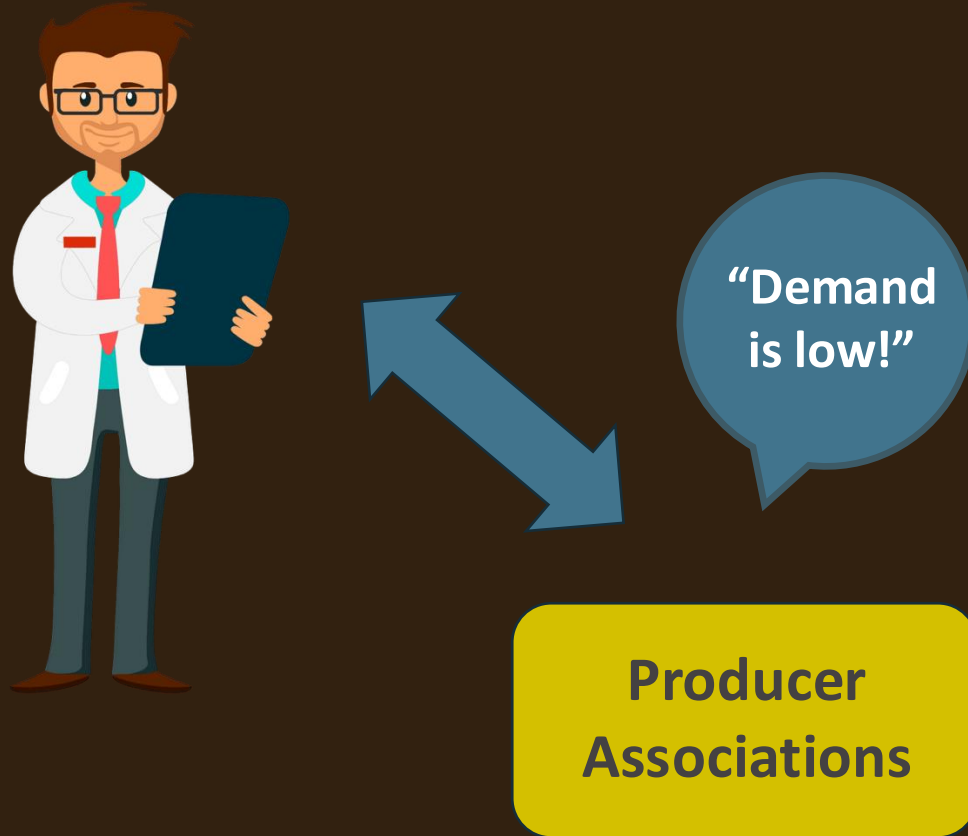


More
Conservation Motivated



More
Action Motivated

Researching Agricultural Producer Motivations



Researching Agricultural Producer Motivations



What did we ask?



WHAT DID WE ASK?

Methods

- All 10 Alberta 'land trusts' (national, provincial, regional, local)
- QuestionPro online survey, 38 questions
- Follow-up phone calls as needed
- September to December of 2025
- Gathered info on
 - General land securement
 - Conservation easement agreements
 - Demand
 - Compensation
 - Funding
 - Landowner attitudes
 - Timelines, and
 - Costs

**What did we
find?**



What did we find?

GENERAL
AGREEMENT DYNAMICS
AGRICULTURE
FINANCIAL
DEMAND
PERCEPTIONS



What did we find?

GENERAL

AGREEMENT DYNAMICS

AGRICULTURE

FINANCIAL

DEMAND

PERCEPTIONS



WHAT DID WE FIND? (GENERAL)

Land conserved

	Acres	Hectares	Percent
Total land conserved	1,502,694	608,119	100%
Conservation easements	623,085	252,154	41.5%
Conservation easements (Local / regional land trusts)			98.3%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (GENERAL)

Land Use Planning Regions



WHAT DID WE FIND? (GENERAL)

Conservation focus (CEs)

- 'Ecological/environmental conservation' by far most-often-cited primary focus for LTs
- 'Species-at-risk' primary for 60%; 20% indicating not a focus
- 'Recreation and public access'
 - As primary goal – 0%
 - Secondary goal - 60%
 - Not a goal - 40%
- Weighted for acres, 'ecological / environmental' primary purpose for 99.8% of Alberta CEs

	Primary	Secondary	N/A
Ecological/Environmental	90%	0%	10%
Species-at-risk	60%	20%	20%
Agricultural	40%	50%	10%
Historical/Cultural	10%	70%	20%
Scenic/Aesthetic	10%	60%	30%
Recreational/Public Access	0%	60%	40%
Other	0%	10%	90%

What did we find?

GENERAL

AGREEMENT DYNAMICS

AGRICULTURE

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WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGREEMENT DYNAMICS)

Agreement Term

Current

Term	Percent
0 - 30 years	0%
30 - 50 years	0%
50 - 99 years	0%
>100 years	0%
Perpetual	100%

Would consider

	Yes	No	Maybe
0 - 30 years	10%	20%	70%
30 - 50 years	10%	30%	60%
50 - 99 years	20%	30%	50%
>100 years	40%	20%	40%
Perpetual	90%	0%	10%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGREEMENT DYNAMICS)

Industrial activity - Renewables

- “how would you characterize your agreements with respect to industrial scale renewable infrastructure”

Statement	Percent
Refuse projects that have industrial scale renewable infrastructure	33%
Require that landowner seek land trust approval if approached regarding industrial scale renewable infrastructure	20%
Do not speak to industrial scale renewable infrastructure	13%
Require that the landowner involve the land trust in any agreement negotiations regarding industrial scale renewable infrastructure	13%
Other	13%
Require the land trust be proportionally compensated from any land renewable infrastructure placement agreements	7%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGREEMENT DYNAMICS)

Industrial activity – Carbon trading rights

- “asked if/how their agreements dealt with existing or potential carbon credit rights”

Statement	Percent
Do not speak to carbon trading rights	80%
Leave carbon trading rights entirely to the landowner	20%
Retain carbon trading rights for the land trust	0%
Share carbon trading rights with the land owner	0%
We do not hold conservation easements	0%
Other	0%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGREEMENT DYNAMICS)

Industrial activity – Sub-surface mineral rights

- “asked if/how they
their agreements dealt
with existing or
potential exploitation
of sub-surface rights”

Statement	Percent
Require that landowner seek land trust approval if approached by subsurface mineral rights holder	38%
Require that the landowner involve the land trust in any land access agreement negotiations	25%
Do not speak to sub-surface mineral rights	13%
Require the land trust be proportionally compensated from any land access agreements	13%
Other	13%
Refuse projects that have unexploited subsurface mineral rights	0%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGREEMENT DYNAMICS)

Ecological Gifts - Prevalence

- Hectares that have been certified as Gifts of Ecologically Sensitive Property

	Acres	Hectares	% of Total
Fee simple acres	543,399	219,905	76%
Conservation easement acres	431,755	174,725	69%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGREEMENT DYNAMICS)

Ecological Gifts – Liability protection

- How / do you mitigate the liability associated with the 'Change in Use' provisions under the EcoGifts program

Statement	Percent
Clause in the conservation easement agreement transferring liability to the landowner if the 'Change in Use' tax is levied against the land trust	20%
Notice in the agreement that landowner will be sued if the 'Change in Use' tax is levied against the land trust	0%
No consideration of the Change in Use clause in our agreements	40%
Other*	40%

**10% indicated do not accept EcoGifts; 30% indicated they follow the EcoGift rules*

WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGREEMENT DYNAMICS)

Timelines

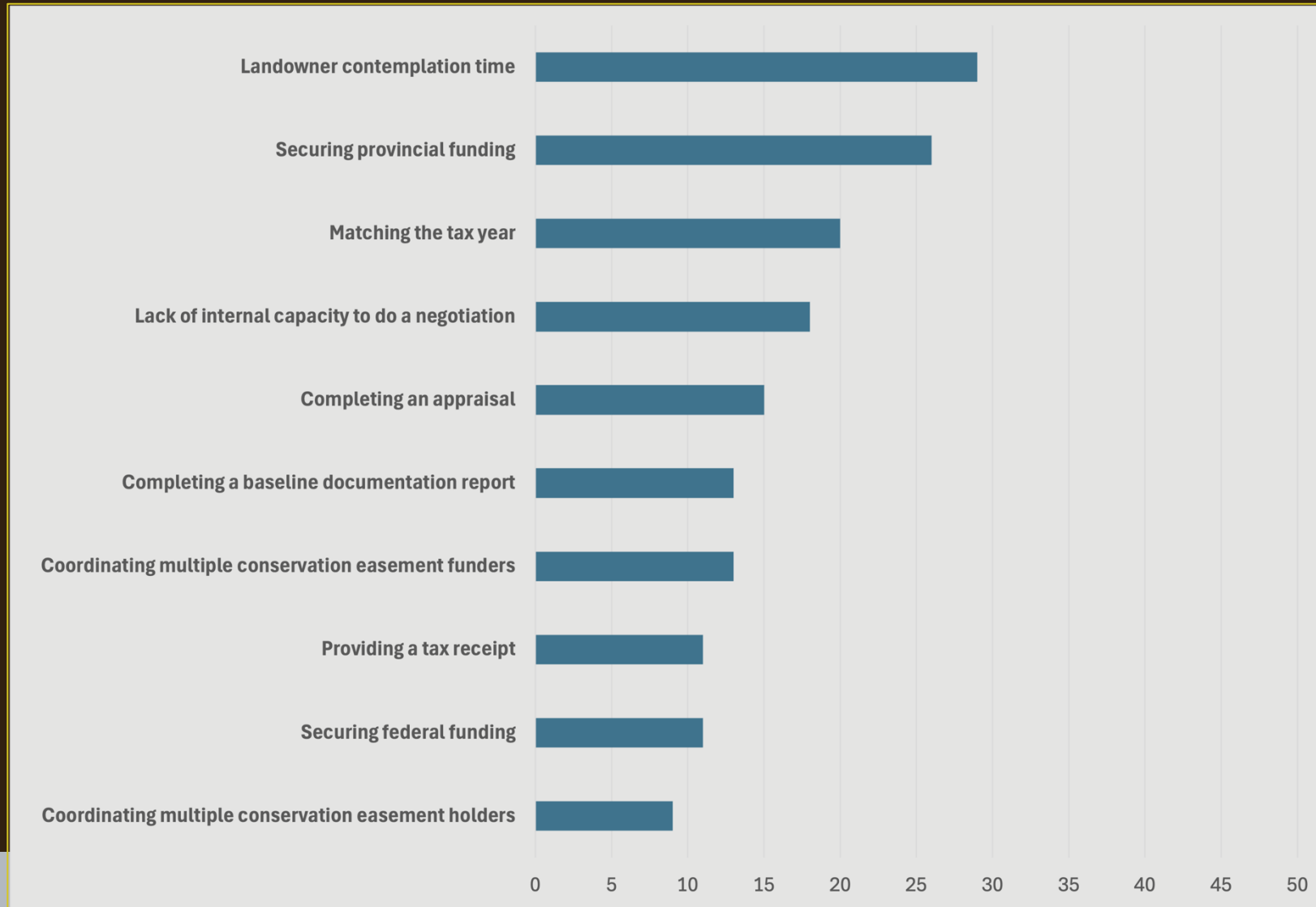
- What is a ‘normal’ timeline for negotiating a conservation easement?
- “For our organization, conservation easements have taken as many as [X] years to complete”

Negotiation timeline	Percent
0 - 1 years	20%
2 - 3 years	80%
3 - 5 years	0%
More than 5 years	0%

Years	
Median	3 years
Range	1 – 5 years
Outlier	20 years

WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGREEMENT DYNAMICS)

Timelines – Extension factors



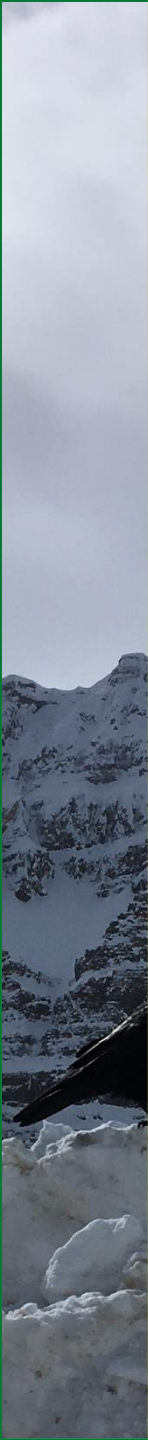
WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGREEMENT DYNAMICS)

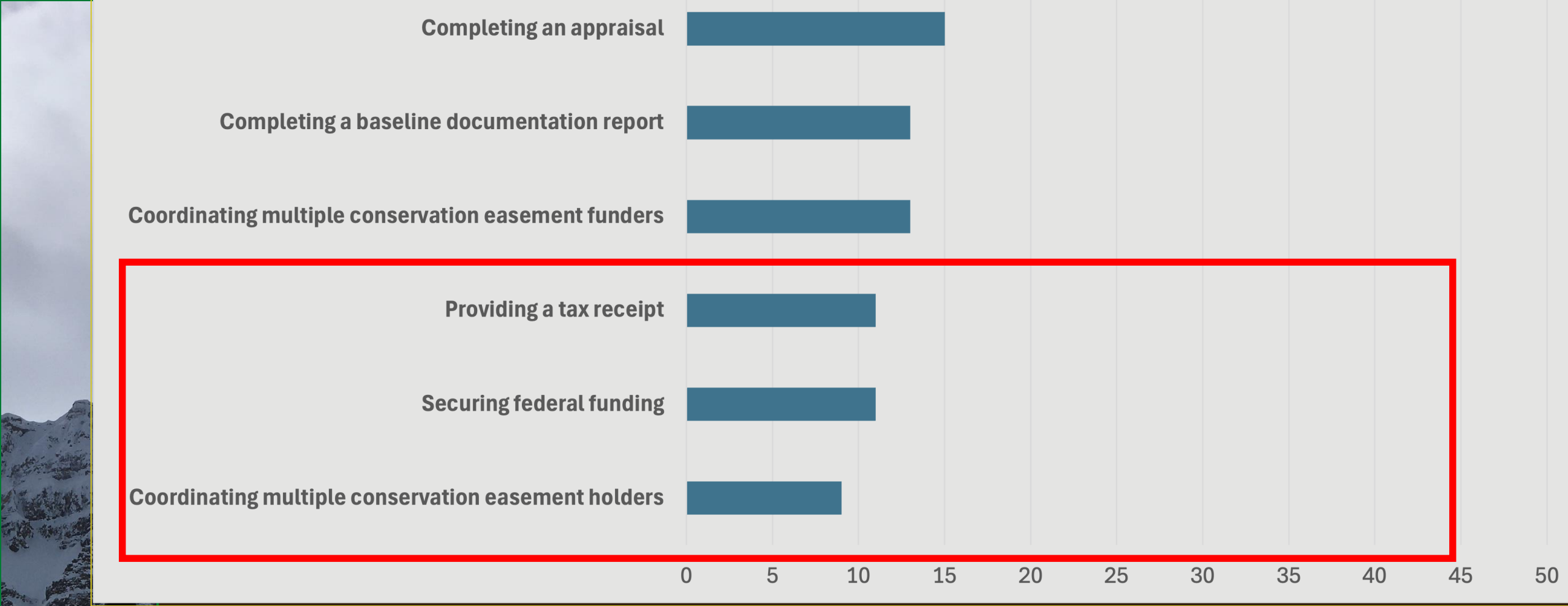
Timelines – Extension factors



WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGREEMENT DYNAMICS)







What did we find?

GENERAL

AGREEMENT DYNAMICS

AGRICULTURE

FINANCIAL

DEMAND

PERCEPTIONS



WHAT DID WE FIND? (AGRICULTURE)

Conservation Easements and Agricultural Operations

Conservation Easement Acres with Agricultural Operations

	Acres	Hectares	% of Total
Conservation easement total	623,085	252,154	100%
On agricultural operations	511,304	206,917	82.1%

Proportion of CE Grantors Who Are Agricultural Producers

Range	0% to 100%
Average	59.5%
Median	72.5%

What did we find?

GENERAL

AGREEMENT DYNAMICS

AGRICULTURE

FINANCIAL

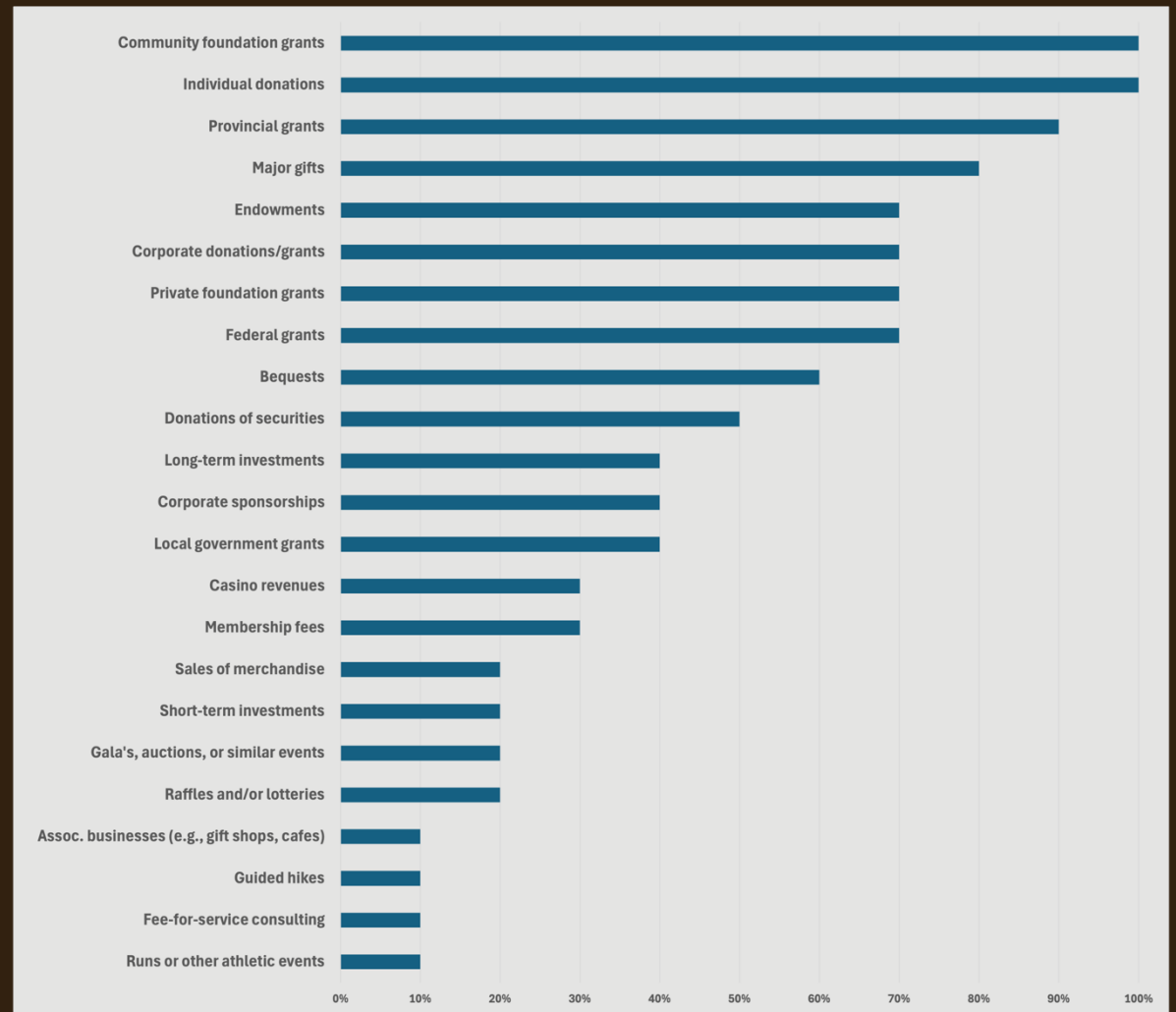
DEMAND

PERCEPTIONS



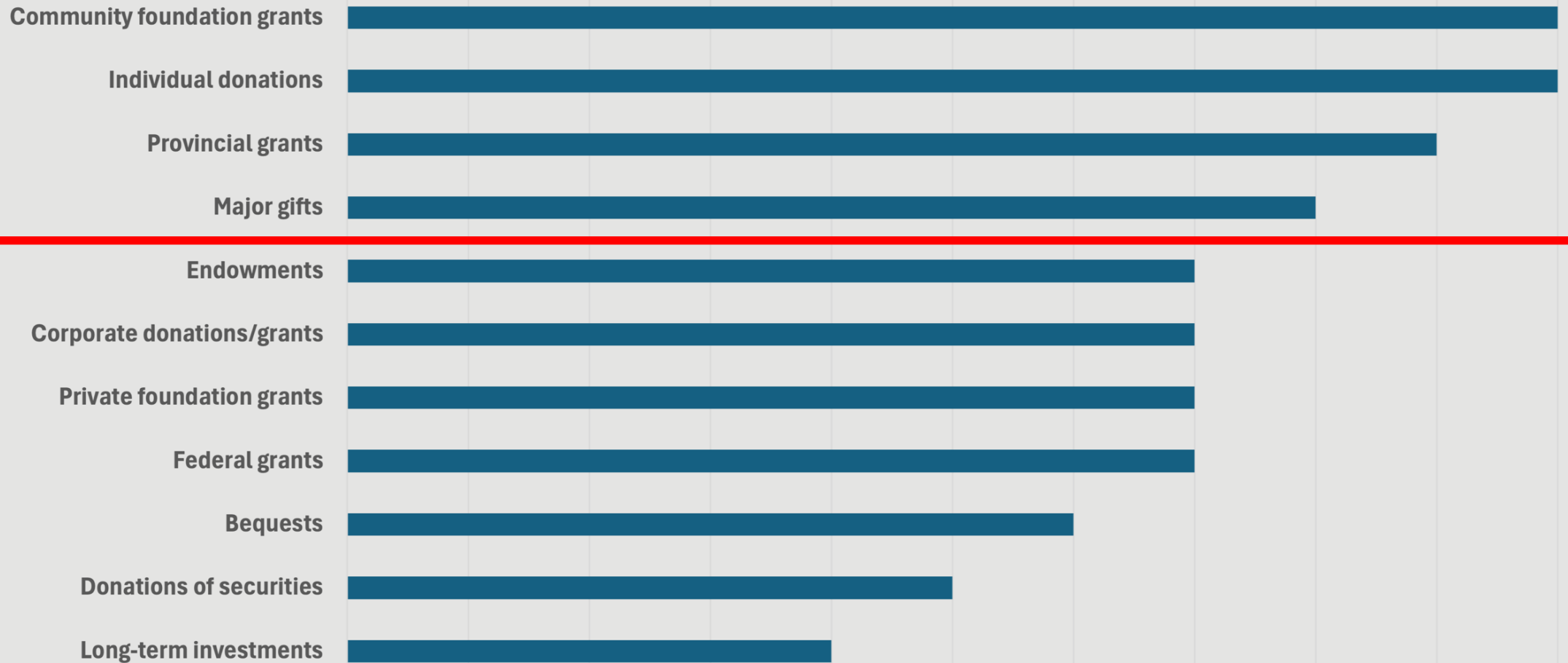
WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Funding Mechanisms



WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Funding Mechanisms



Community foundation grants

Individual donations

Provincial grants

Major gifts

Endowments

Corporate donations/grants

Private foundation grants

Federal grants

Bequests

Donations of securities

Long-term investments

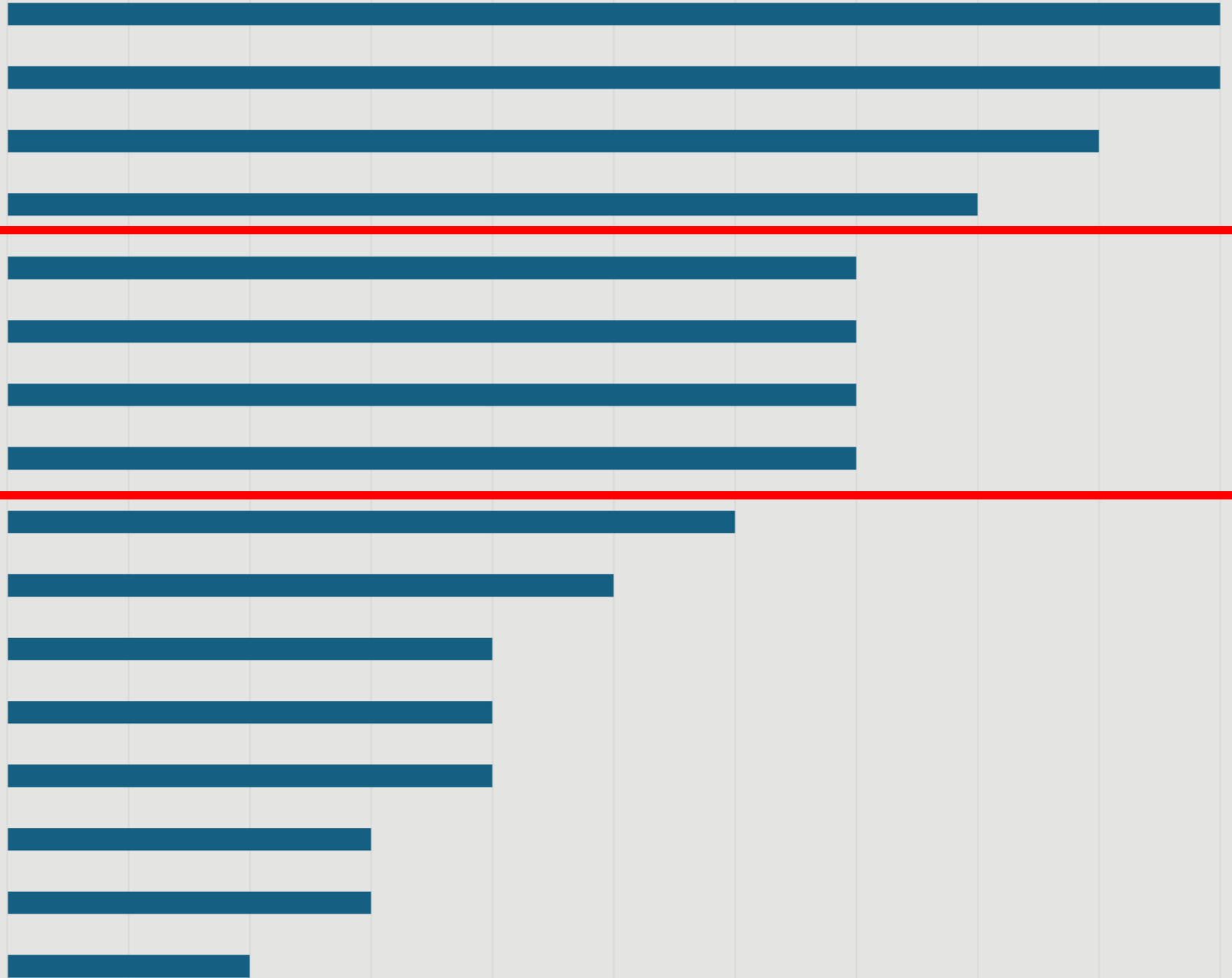
Corporate sponsorships

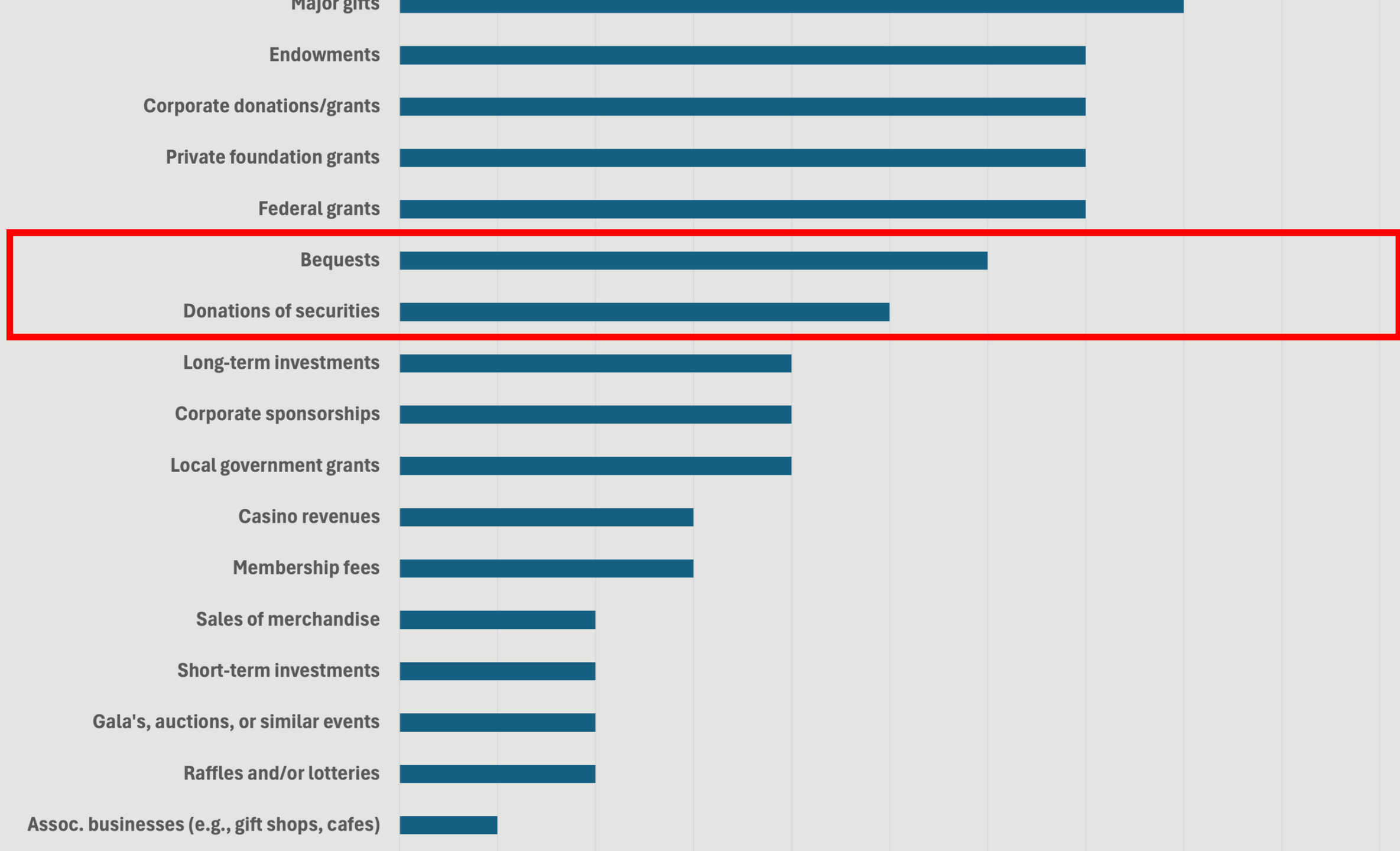
Local government grants

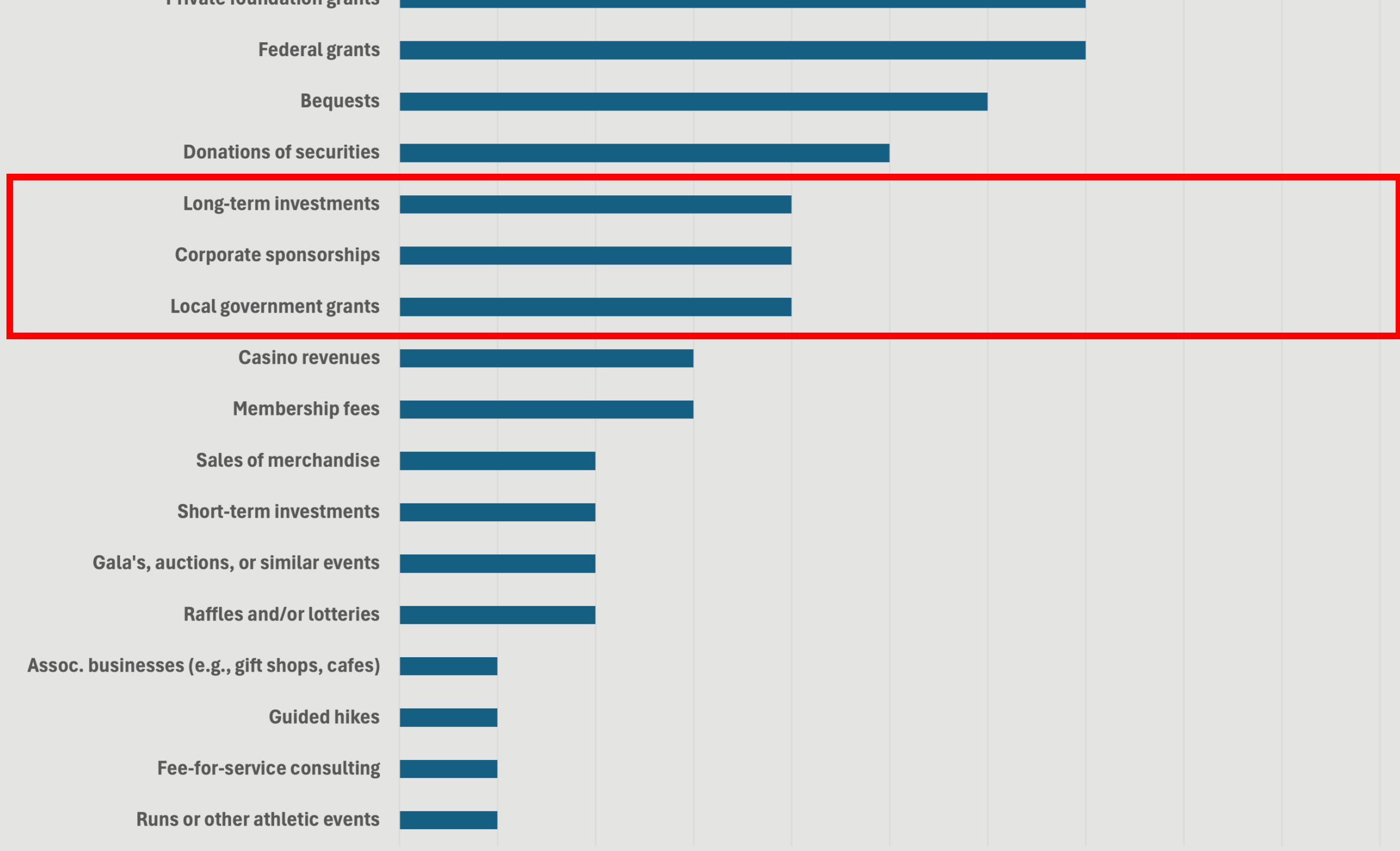
Casino revenues

Membership fees

Sales of merchandise







WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Funding Mechanisms

Government

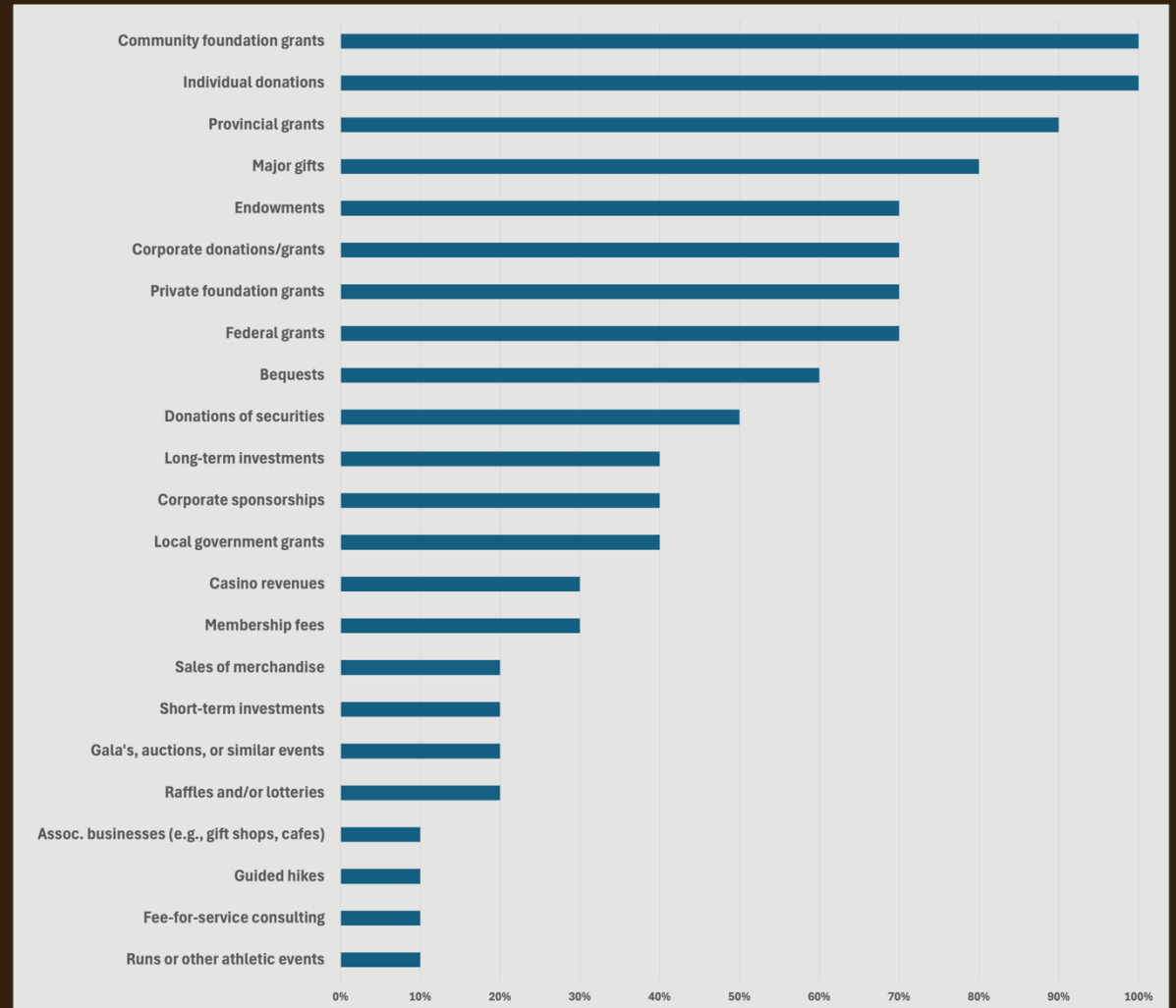
- Provincial (90%)
- Federal (70%)
- Local (40%)

Foundation

- Community (100%)
- Private (70%)

Donations

- Individual (100%)
- Major gifts (80%)
- Bequests (60%)



WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

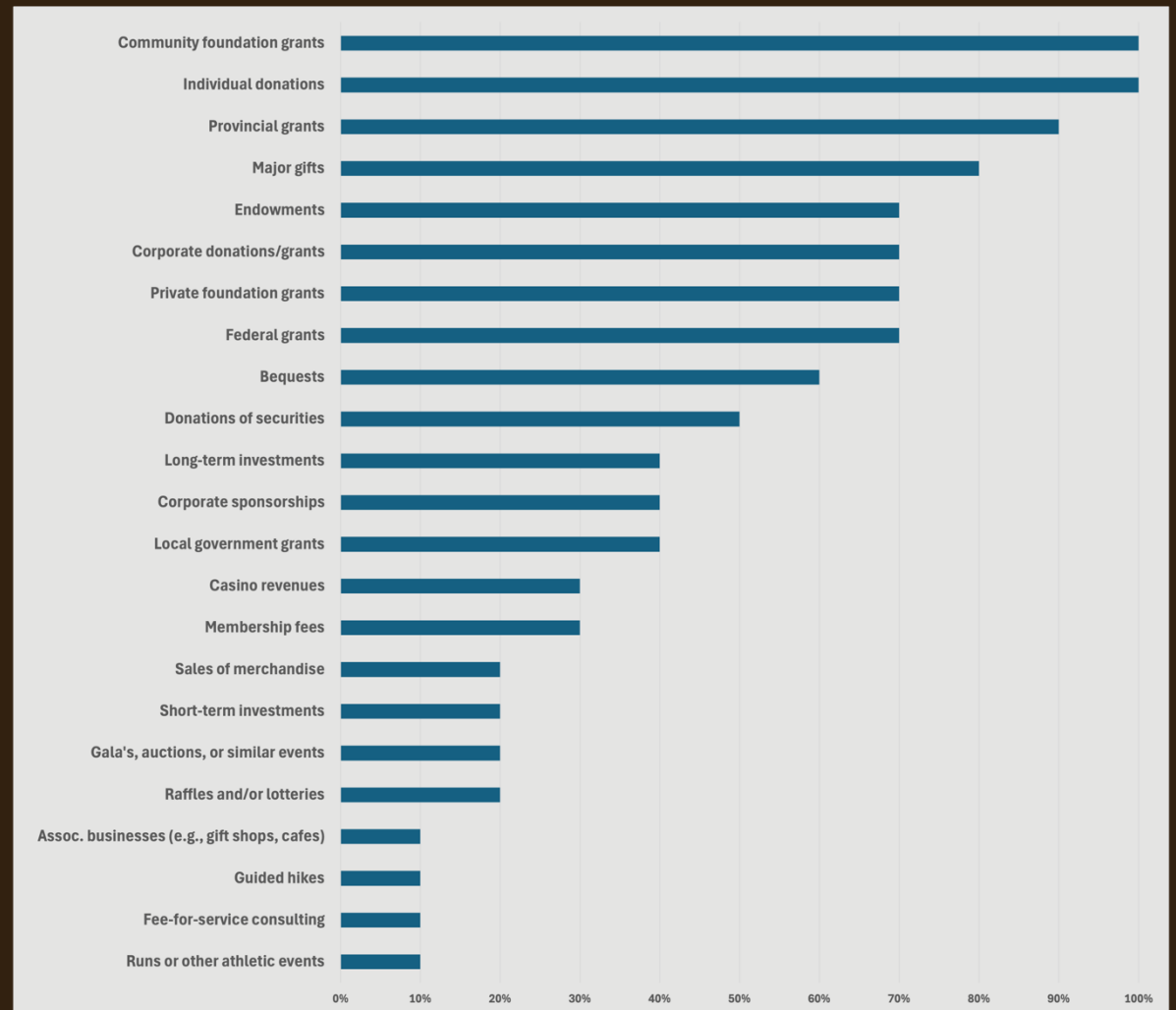
Funding Mechanisms

Corporate

- Donations (70%)
- Sponsorships (40%)

Investments

- Endowments (70%)
- Long-term investments (40%)

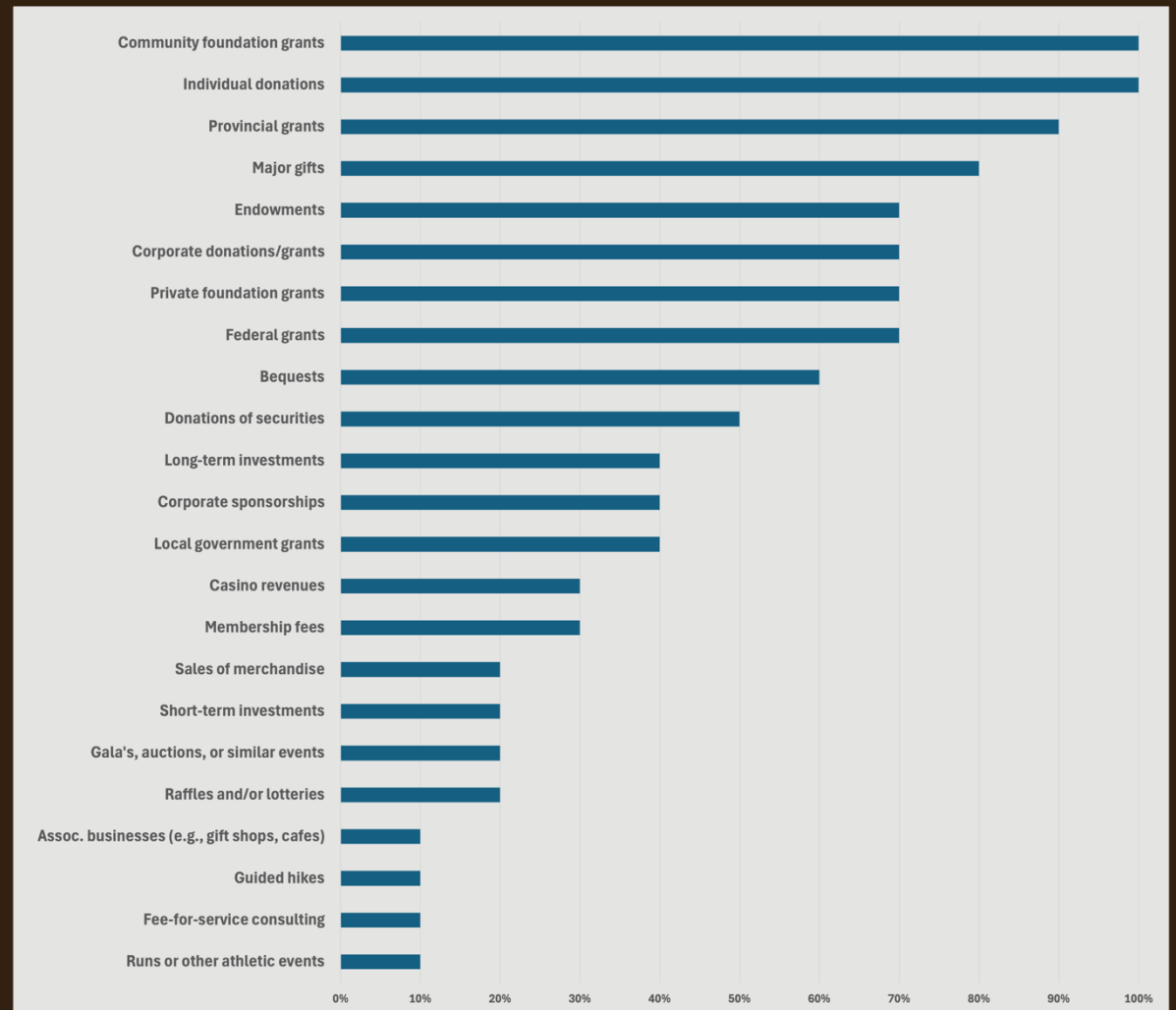


WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Funding Mechanisms

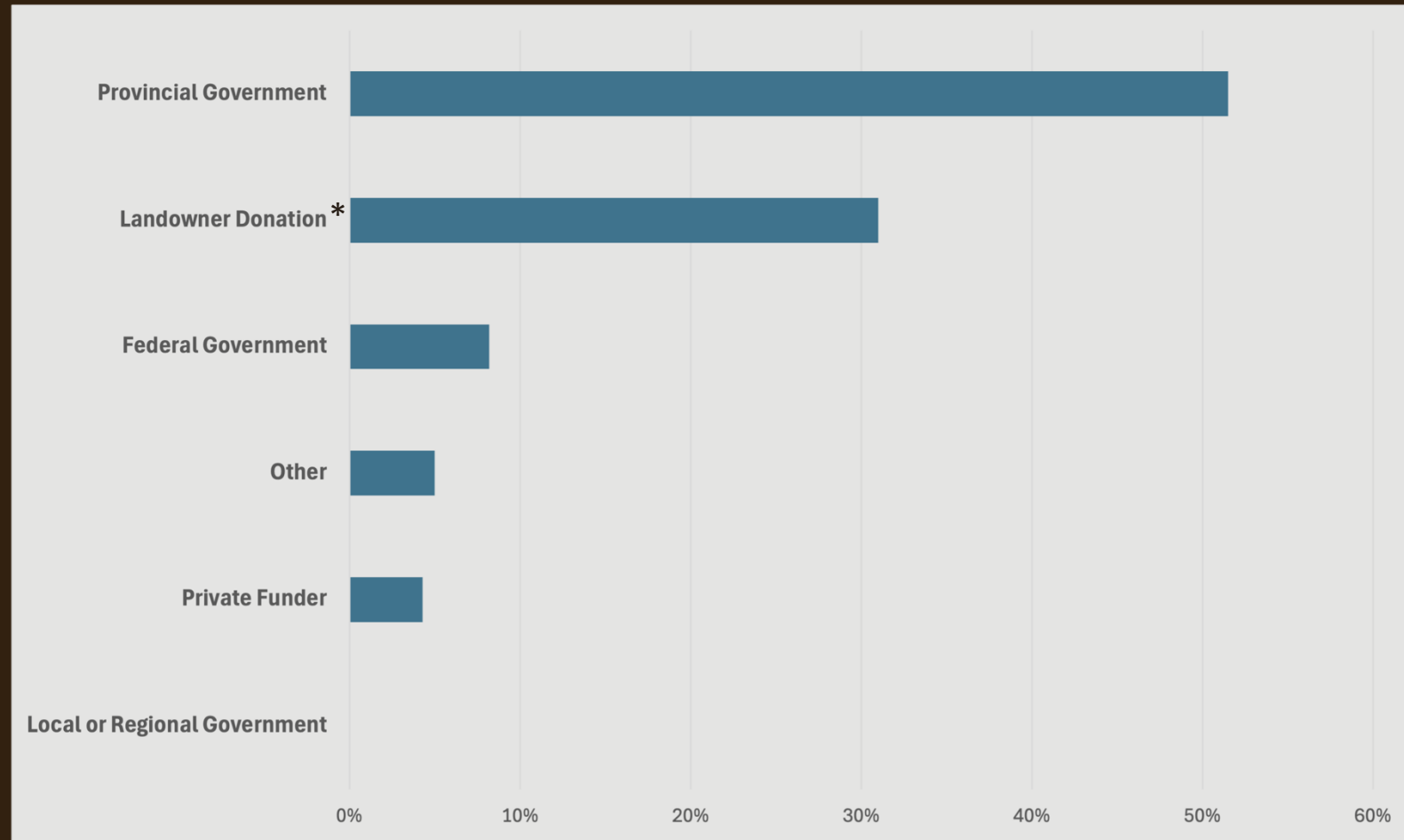
Unused sources

- Crowdfunding
- Access fees to properties
- Contracts for government service delivery
- Speakers fees
- Paid webinars
- Training
- Facility rentals



WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Funding Mechanisms for Conservation Easements



**NB: This is 'cash', does not include value of donation receipt for conservation easement*

WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Securement Costs

- “Estimate your ‘average’ cost of securing a conservation easement, as proportion of the total project cost”

Average	22%
Median	14%
Average (Local / regional land trusts)	19%
Median (Local / regional land trusts)	14%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Securement Costs

- “consider an 'average' conservation easement project, and estimate the proportion of the cost attributable to the following elements”

	Average	Median
Stewardship endowment	39%	37%
Other	28%	18%
Staff time	18%	15%
Baseline Report	8%	6%
Appraisal	4%	4%
Legal defence fund	4%	0%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Stewardship Costs

- “consider your overall expenditures on 'stewardship', and estimate the proportion dedicated to each of the following elements”

	Average	Median
Staff time	66%	80%
Other	14%	0%
Legal defence fund	10%	0%
Remote surveillance	6%	0%
Mapping / imagery	4%	2%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Stewardship Costs – STAFF TIME

- “looking only at those 'staff time' costs, apportion them to the following elements”

	Average	Median
Monitoring	49%	50%
Write up and reporting	26%	30%
Landowner comms	22%	15%
Enforcement	3%	0%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Valuation of Conservation Easements

- “indicate how you determined amount of compensation provided to landowners for granting a conservation easement”

	Average	Median
Qualified third-party appraiser	20%	90%
Internal reality team	0%	0%
Use set price determined by funder	0%	0%
Use set percentage of CE value	10%	0%

WHAT DID WE FIND? (FINANCIAL)

Compensation for Conservation Easements

All land trusts

	Tax receipt alone	Cash payment alone	Combination
Average	65%	11%	25%
Median	95%	0%	0%

Local & regional land trusts

	Tax receipt alone	Cash payment alone	Combination
Average	74%	0%	26%
Median	100%	0%	0%

Weighted by acres

	Tax receipt alone	Cash payment alone	Combination
All land trusts	32%	18%	51%
Local and regional land trusts	44%	0%	56%

What did we find?

GENERAL

AGREEMENT DYNAMICS

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DEMAND

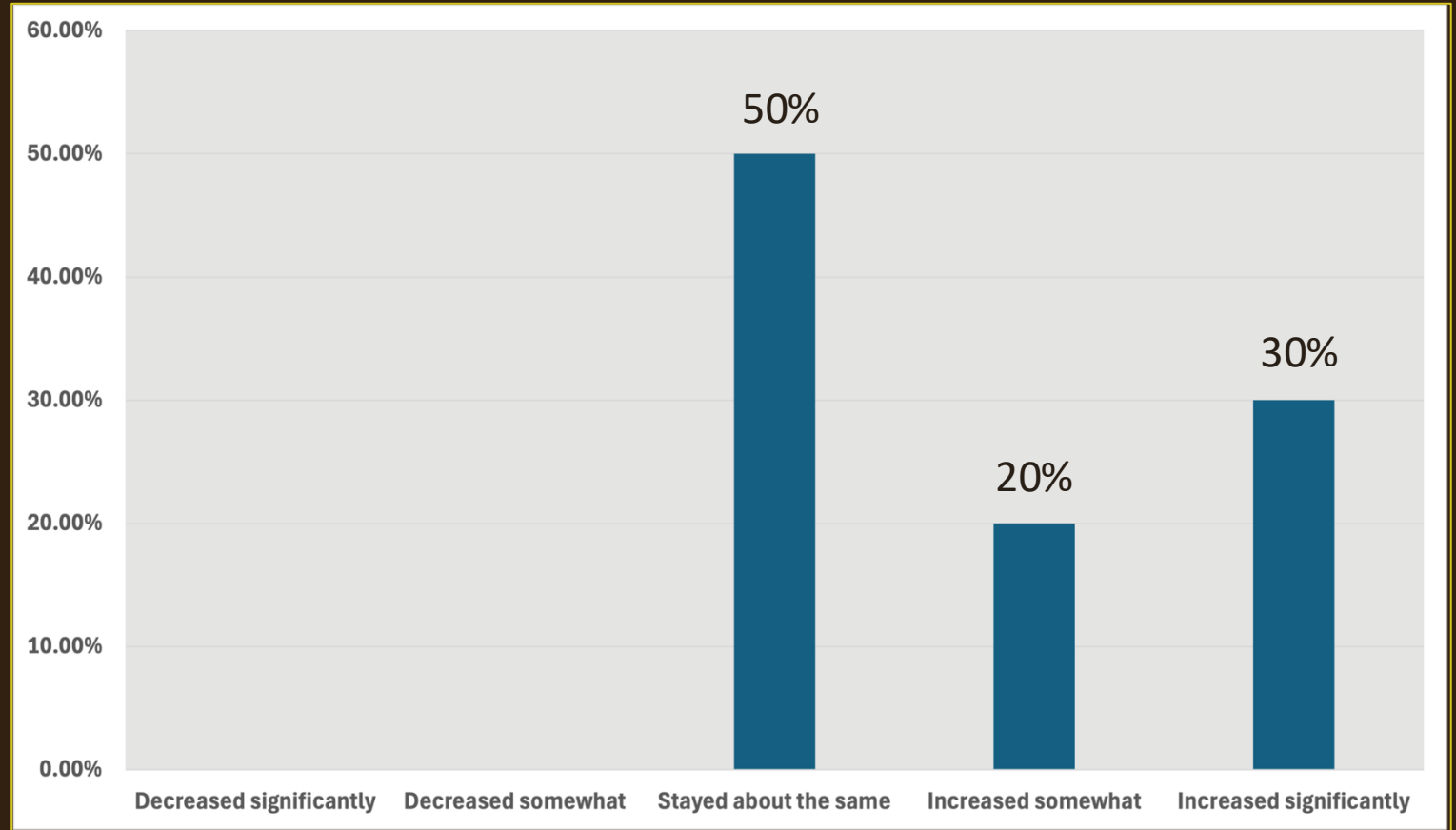
PERCEPTIONS



WHAT DID WE FIND? (DEMAND)

Demand Trends

- “think back over the previous 5 years, and estimate how demand for perpetual conservation easements has changed (or not)”



WHAT DID WE FIND? (DEMAND)

Demand vs Available Funding

- “consider the previous 5 years, and characterize demand for perpetual conservation easements relative to funding”

Statement	Proportion
Exceeded available funding significantly	30%
Exceeded available funding somewhat	20%
Matched available funding	40%
Lagged behind available funding somewhat	10%
Lagged behind available funding significantly	0%

What did we find?

GENERAL

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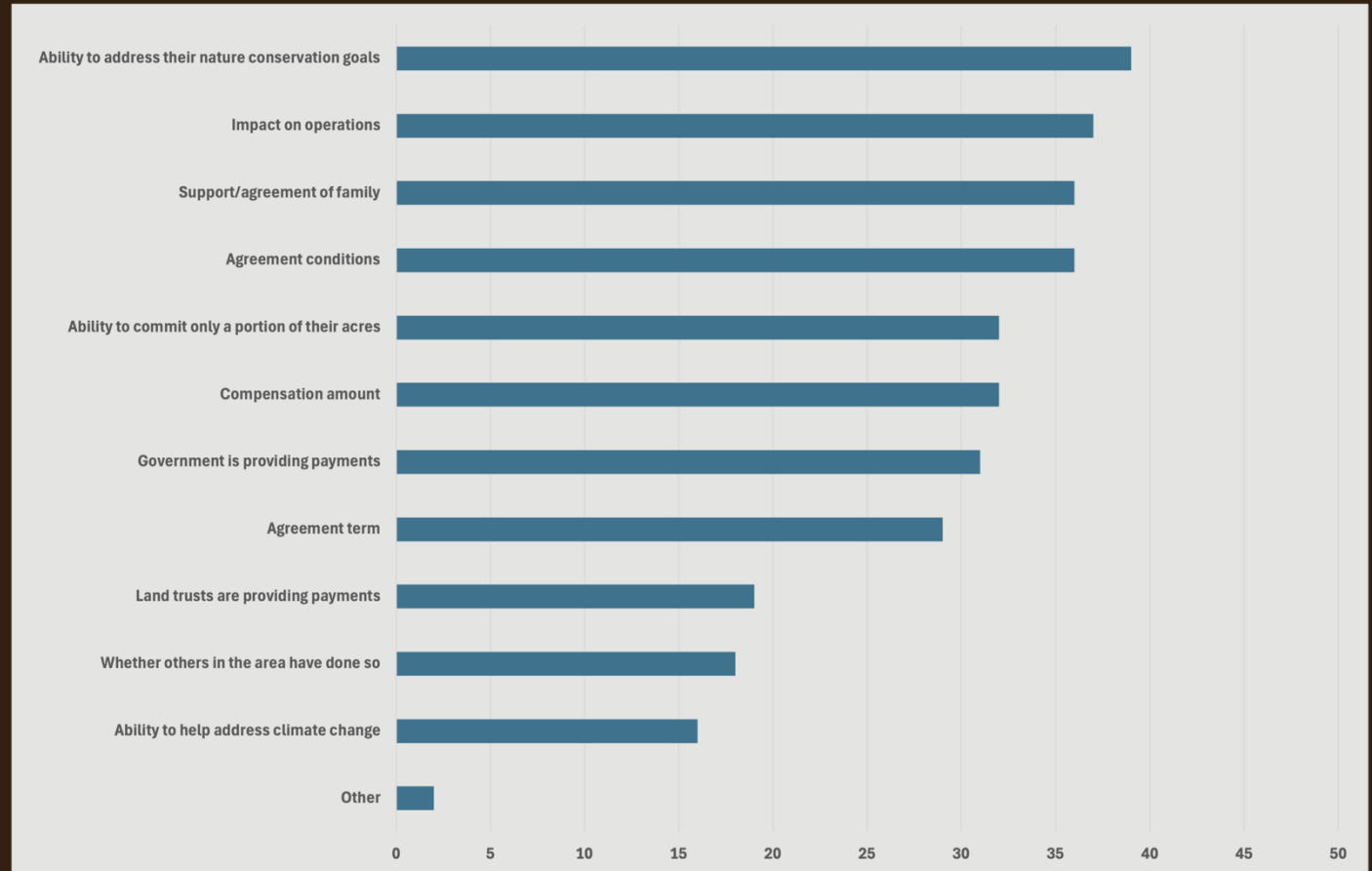
PERCEPTIONS



WHAT DID WE FIND? (PERCEPTIONS)

Landowner decision factors

- “Thinking of landowner partners, how significant would the following factors be in decision to participate in program requiring long-term commitment to leave land in natural state”



WHAT DID WE FIND? (PERCEPTIONS)

Landowner decision factors

“Thinking of Landowner”

Ability to address their nature conservation goals

Impact on operations

Support/agreement of family

Agreement conditions

Ability to commit only a portion of their acres

Compensation amount

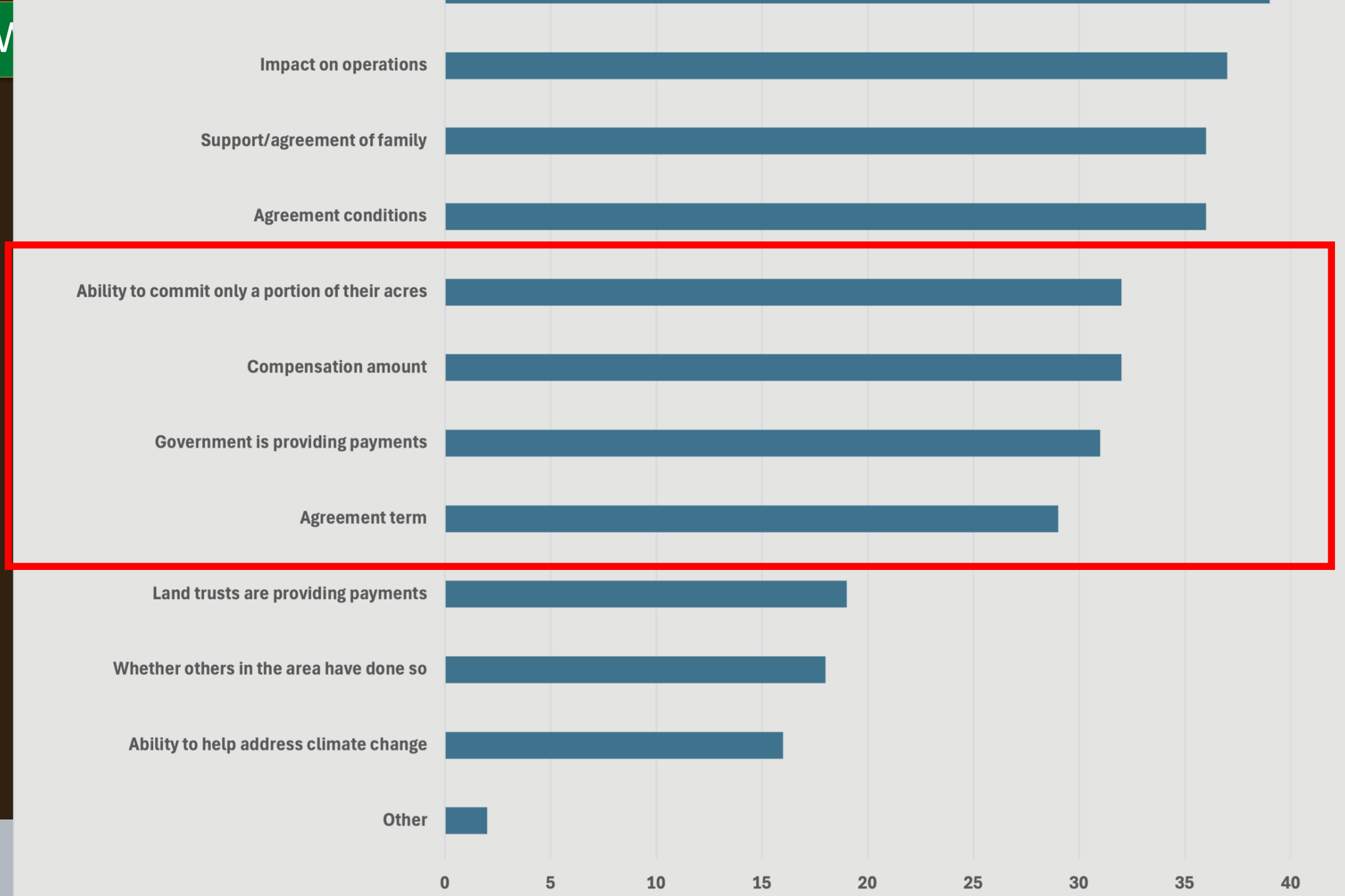
Government is providing payments

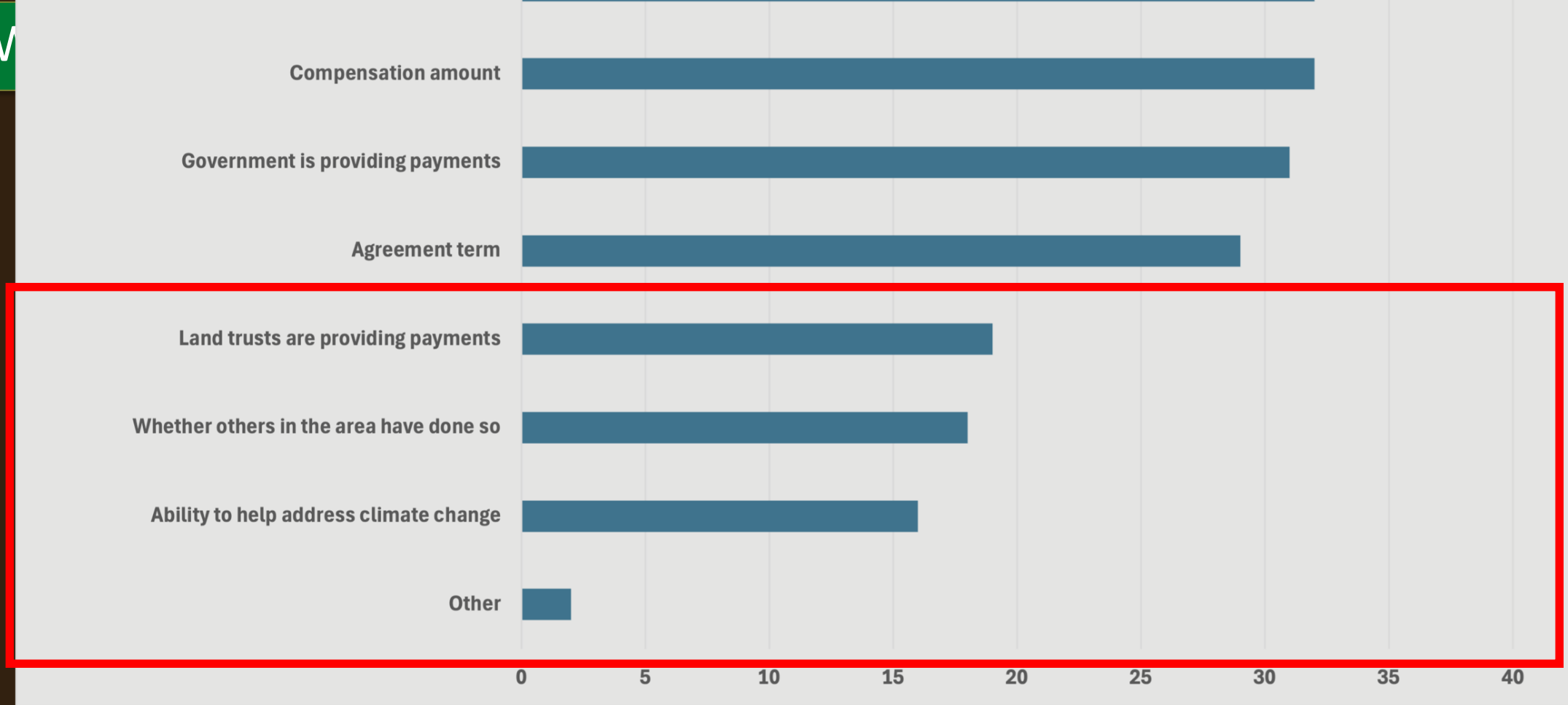
Agreement term





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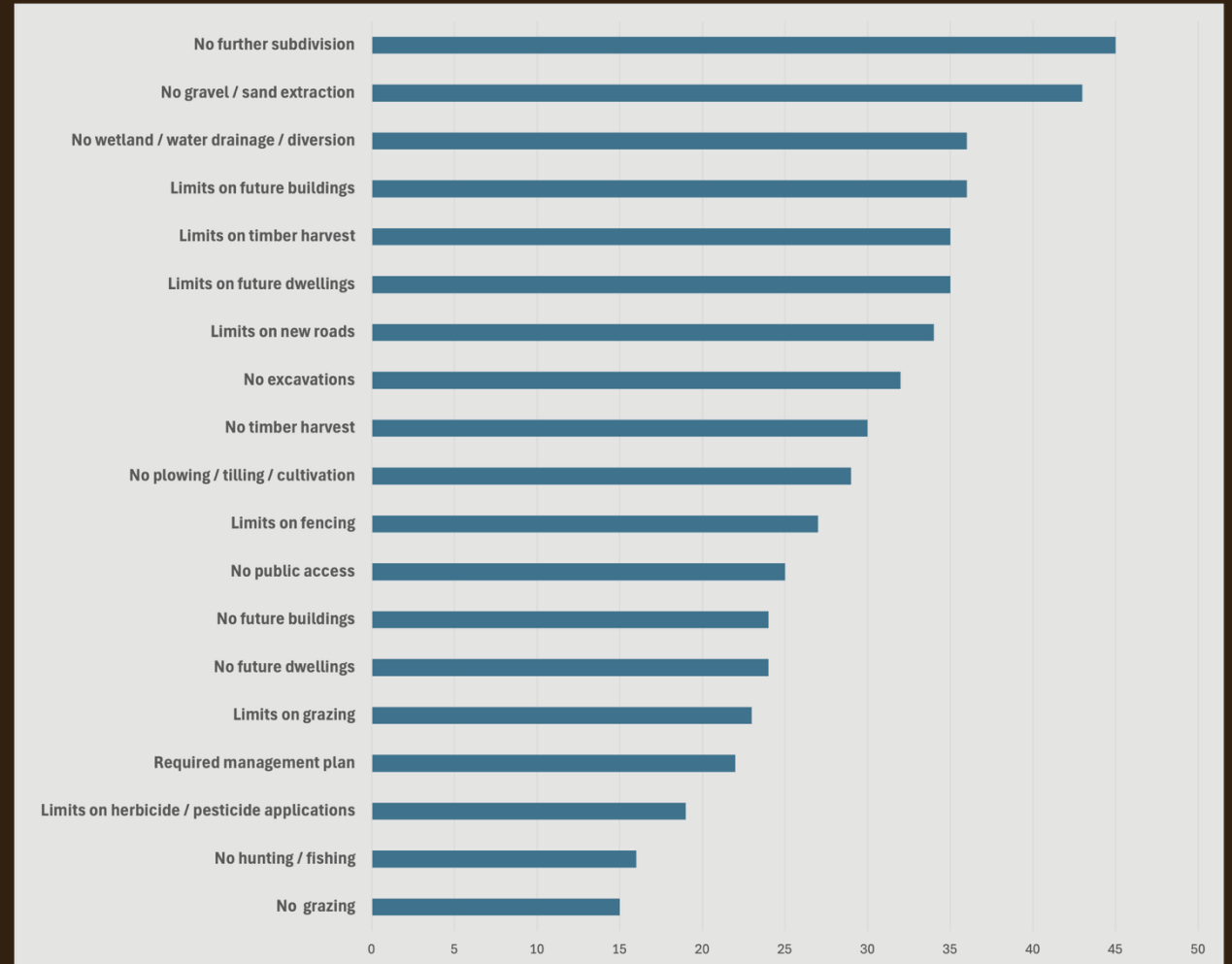


to leave land in natural
state”

WHAT DID WE FIND? (PERCEPTIONS)

Palatability of various restrictions

- “which conservation easement restrictions / prescriptions are most palatable to your landowner partners collectively”



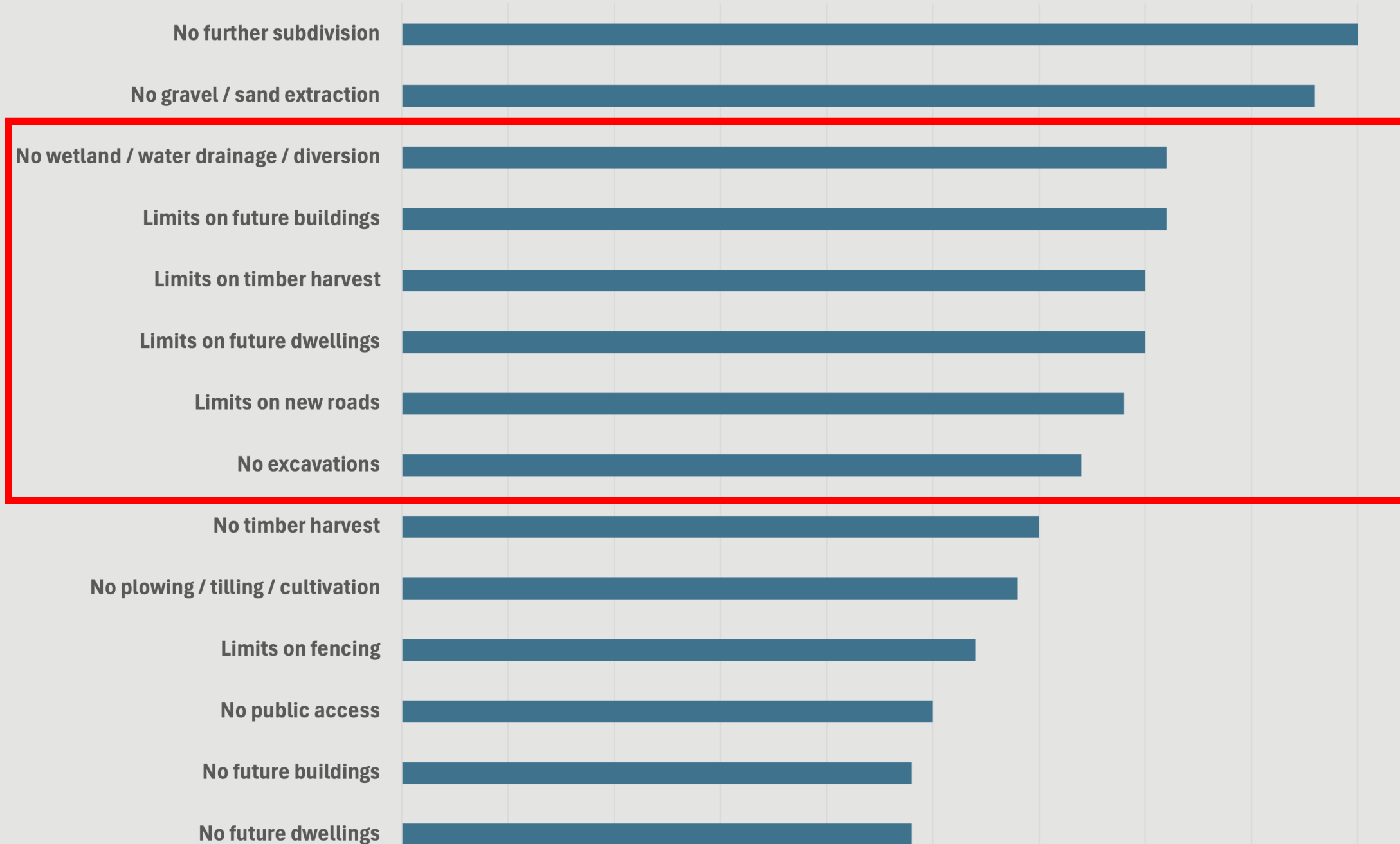
WHAT DID WE FIND? (PERCEPTIONS)

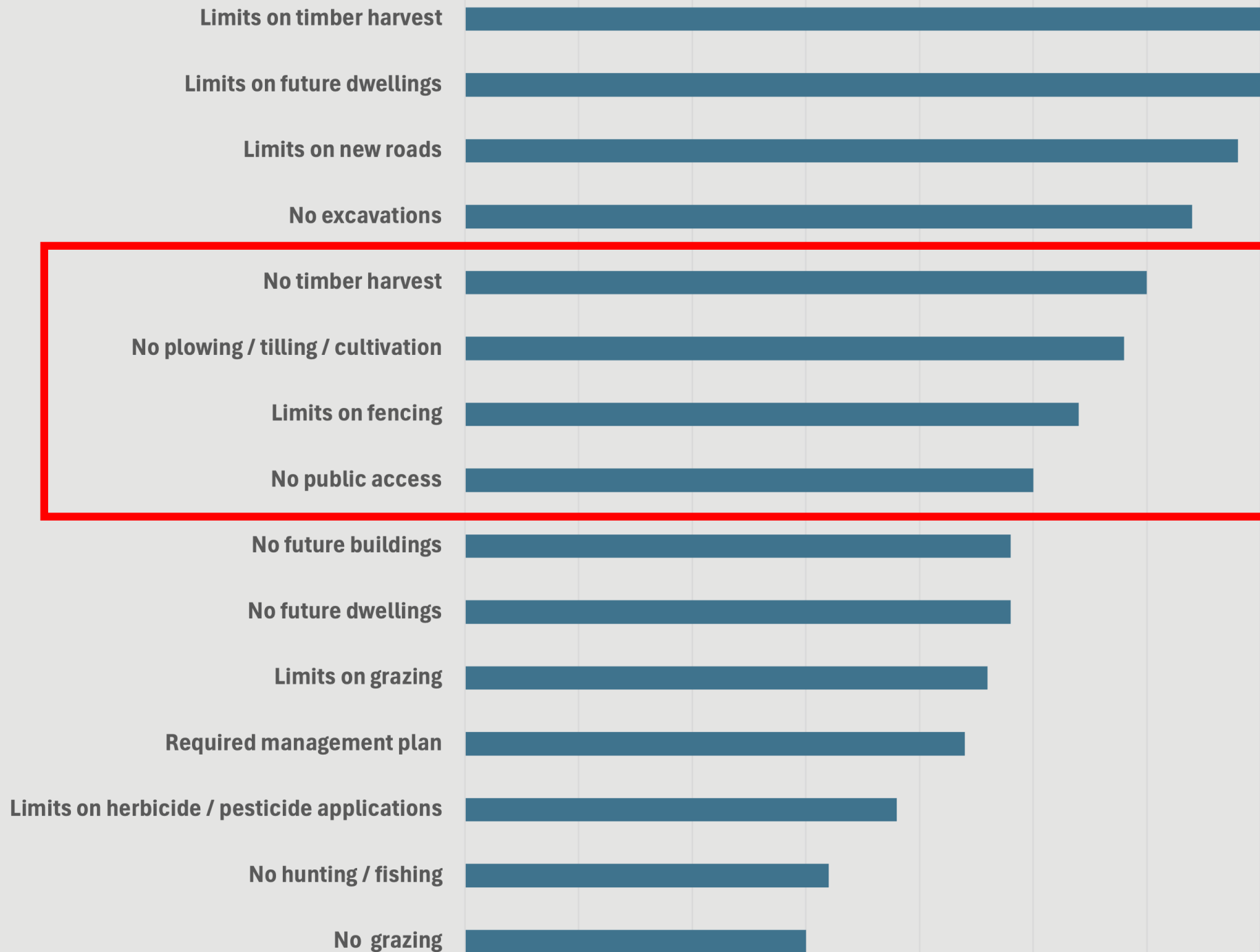
Palatability of various restrictions

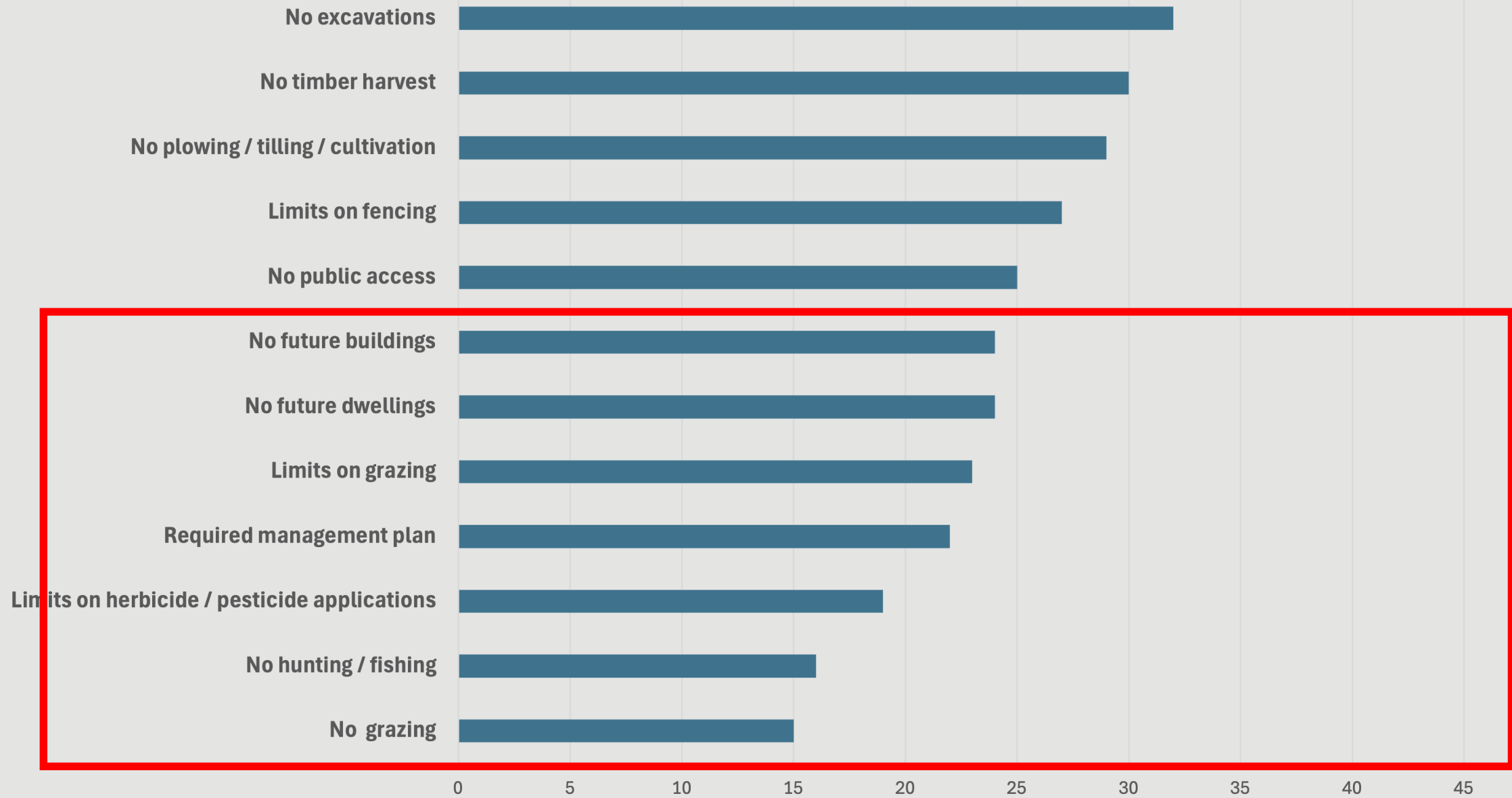
- “which



WHAT DID WE FIND? (PERCEPTIONS)



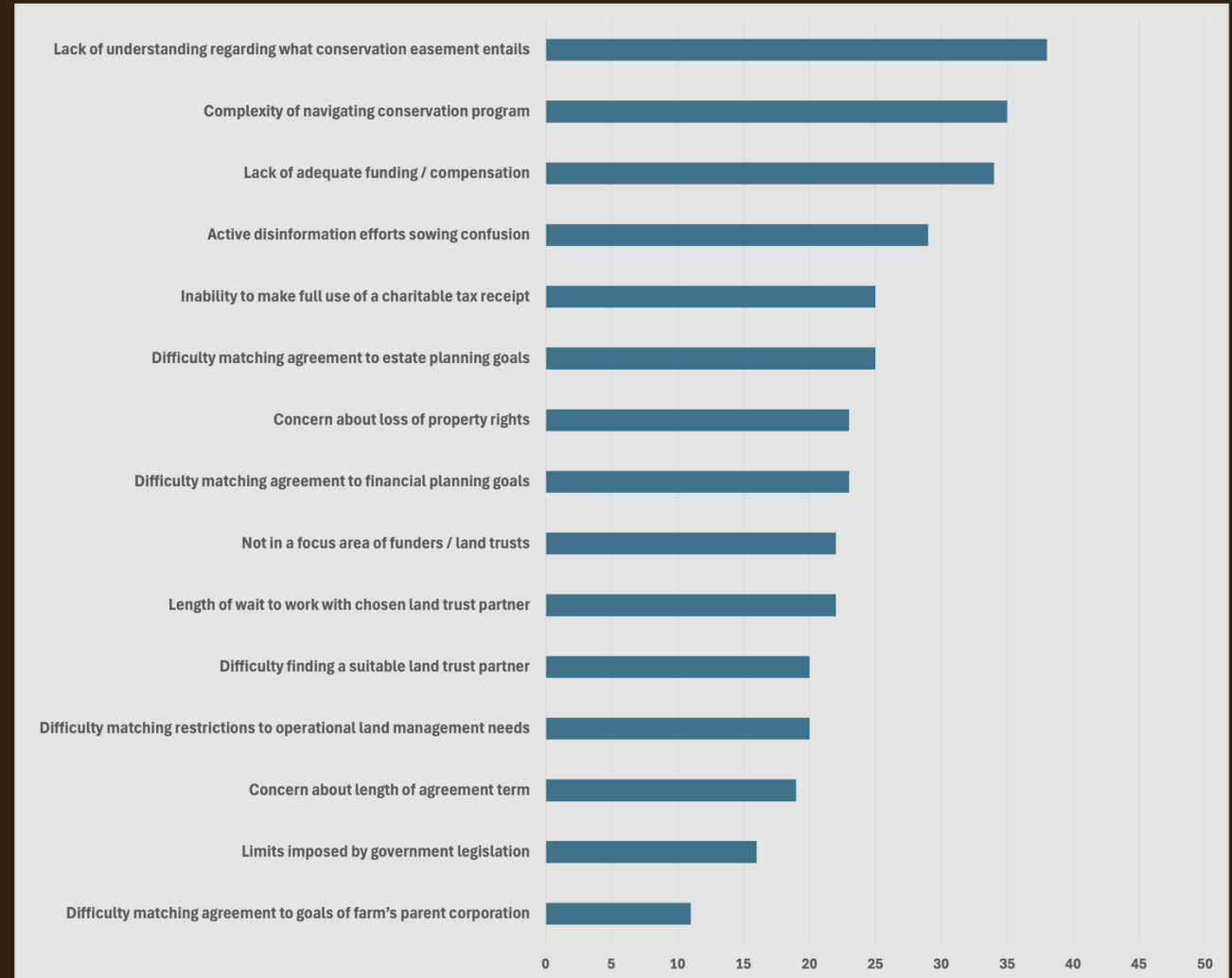




WHAT DID WE FIND? (PERCEPTIONS)

Barriers to participation

- “how significant are the following barriers for landowner partners seeking to entering into conservation easements”



WHAT DID WE FIND? (PERCEPTIONS)

Barriers to participation

Lack of understanding regarding what conservation easement entails



Complexity of navigating conservation program



Lack of adequate funding / compensation



Active disinformation efforts sowing confusion



Inability to make full use of a charitable tax receipt



Difficulty matching agreement to estate planning goals



Concern about loss of property rights

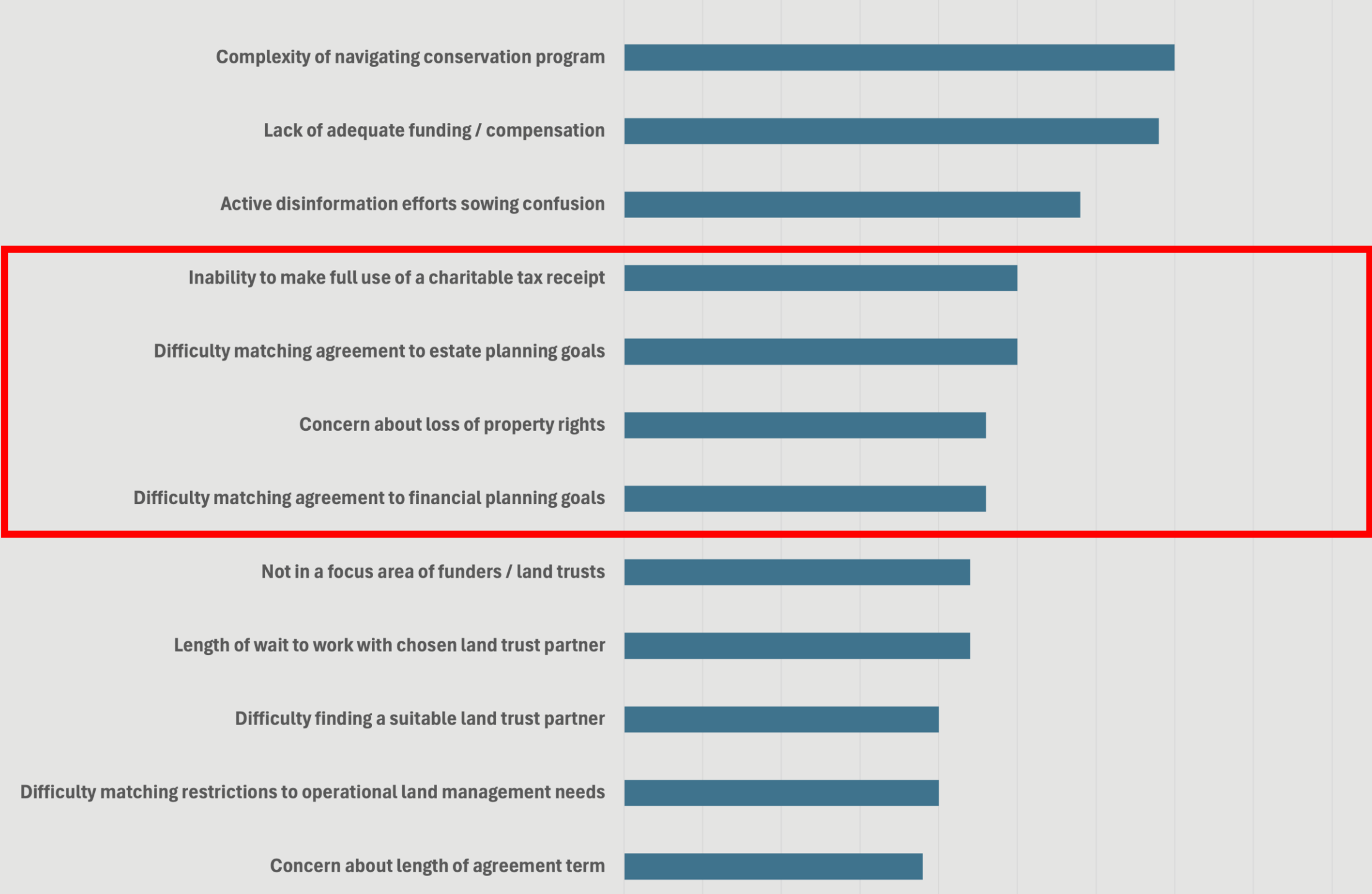


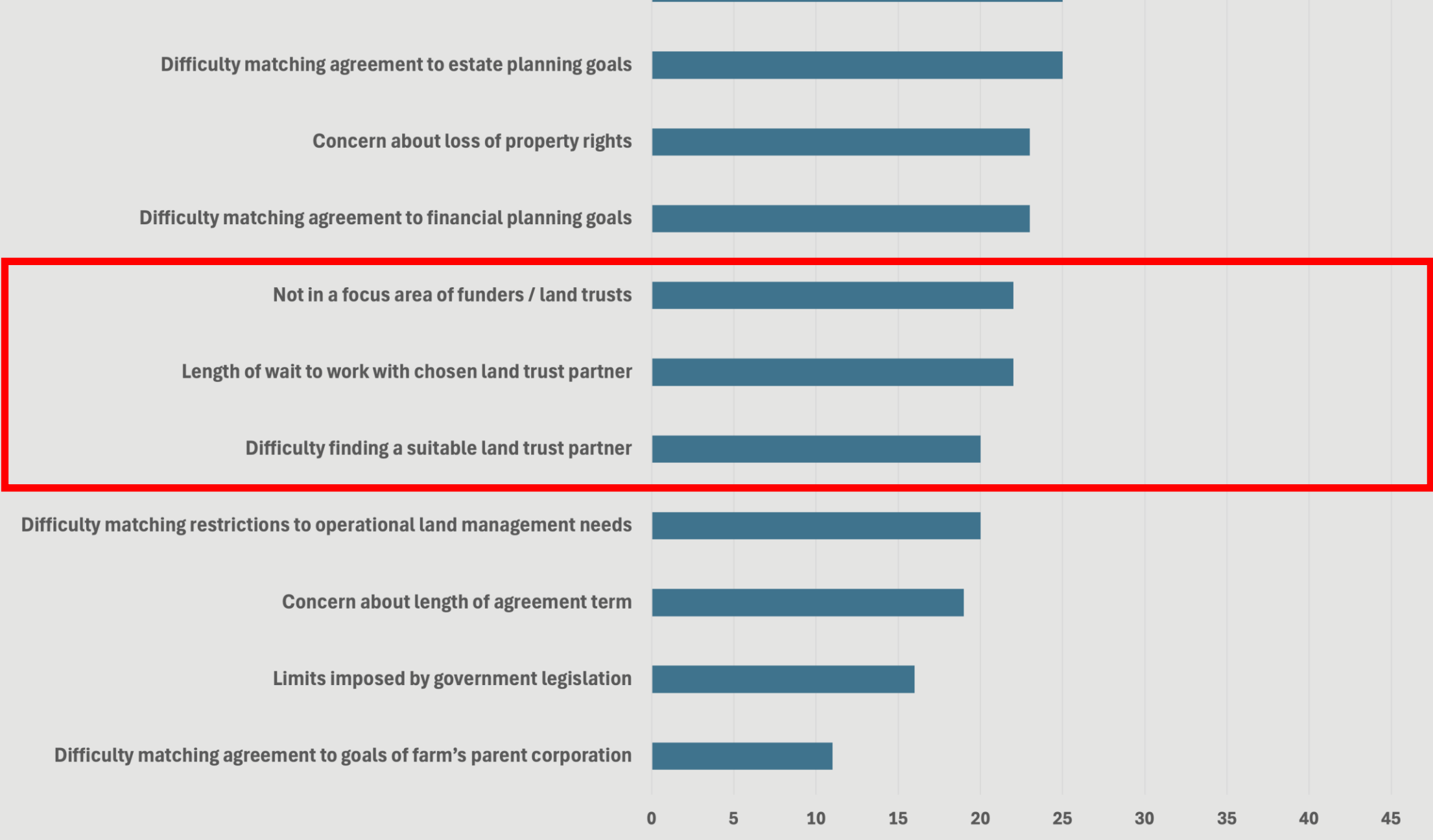
Difficulty matching agreement to financial planning goals

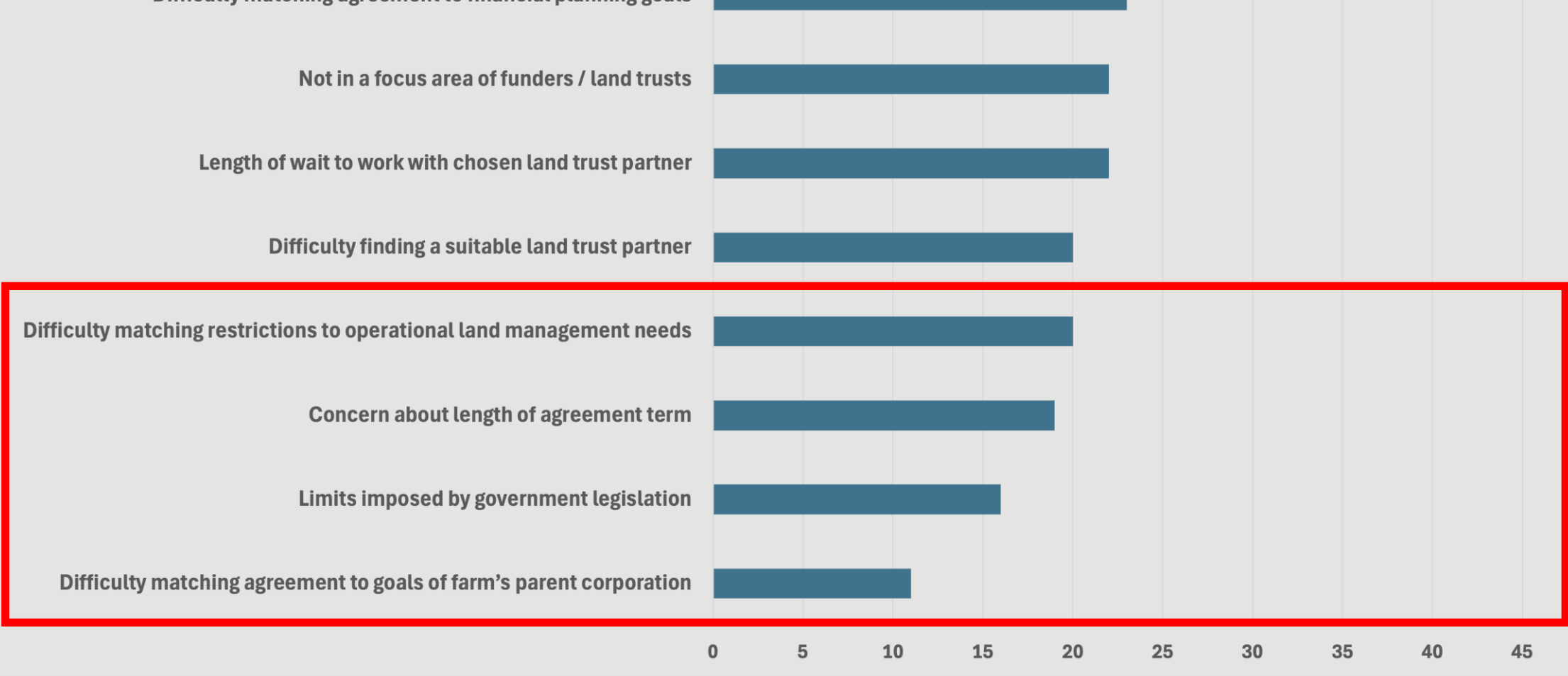


Not in a focus area of funders / land trusts









conservation
easements”

WHAT DID WE FIND? (PERCEPTIONS)

Barriers to participation

- “how significant are the following barriers for landowner partners seeking to entering into conservation easements”

- Agreement when there are multiple title holders
- Mismatched desires within the landowner's family
- Government of Alberta no longer financially supporting perpetual conservation easements



**What does this tell
us?**



WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

1.

Ecological /
environmental
purposes
predominate

- No question 'environmental/ecological' purposes predominate
- Outstrips all others as a primary theme; agriculture distant runner-up
- Culture, scenery, and recreation all have prominence only as secondary purposes
- Reason might seem obvious – AB CEs only be usable for 'environment, scenery, and/or agricultural land' ... but see 'Agriculture'

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

2.

Demand for perpetual CEs very strong; funding not keeping pace

- All CEs to date are perpetual
- 50% indicated demand had increased significantly (30%) or somewhat (20%)
- 50% of LTs indicated that demand had remained unchanged
- 50% of respondents indicated that demand exceeded available funding significantly (30%) or somewhat (20%)

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

3.

GoA priorities
will push
adoption of
temporary
easements

- LT's reported all of existing CEs were perpetual, demand for perpetual was growing or consistent, yet majority would now consider '0 – 30 years' terms
- What happened?
- As research begun, GoA cancelled funding for perpetual conservation easements

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

3.

GoA priorities
will push
adoption of
temporary
easements

- This research shows:
 - Demand for perpetual easements in Alberta is strong
 - LTs traditionally not interested in temporary CEs
 - 52% of funding for the acquisition of CEs in previous years from GoA
 - Tax receipts critical factor (temporary CEs likely not eligible)

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

3.

GoA priorities
will push
adoption of
temporary
easements

- Possibilities
 - No. of temporary easements rises as response to funding
 - No. of temporary easements rises in the short term, then drops as tax receipt issues become apparent
 - Increase in the importance of federal / other funding

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

4.

Barriers to participation led by 'understanding' issues

- Several barriers to participation identified in this research (and the broader research)
- Here, top-most factors relate to awareness and information; three of top four were:
 - 'Lack of understanding regarding what conservation easement entails'
 - 'Complexity of navigating conservation program'
 - 'Active disinformation efforts sowing confusion'

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

5.

Industrial
activity
consideration is
inconsistent

- 'Industrial-scale renewables'
 - 1/3 of respondents would refuse properties with such infrastructure
 - 13% say agreements don't speak to issue
- 'Carbon rights'
 - 80% said agreements have no mention
- Subsurface mineral rights
 - 63% require landowner involve the land trust
 - 13% don't speak to this issue

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

6.

EcoGift benefits
promoted but
liabilities
unmanaged

- 69% of conservation easement acres are EcoGifted
- 76% of the fee-simple acres are EcoGifted
- 40% (possibly as high as 70%) have no consideration of the 'change in use' liability
- 20% explicitly transfer the liability to the landowner

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

7.

Agricultural
producers are
critical

- 82.1% of conservation easement acres in Alberta on active agricultural operations,
- 59.5% (average) to 72.5% (median) of grantees were agricultural producers.
- Shows the outsized importance of both agricultural lands and agricultural landowner partners

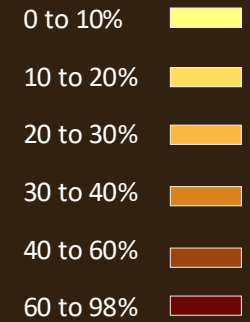
WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

7.

Agriculture
producer
critic

Proportion of ag land that is
valuable wildlife habitat



Stats Canada, 2014

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

8.

Funding for conservation easements relies heavily on government

- For conservation easement projects (not organization's operations),
 - 52% of funding from provincial government
 - 8.2% from the federal government.
- GoA push to see only temporary easements good example of dangers in over-dependence on single source

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

9.

Funding for land trust operations relies heavily on private sources

- Funding to support land trust operations comes from much broader array of sources
 - Examples: Donations, foundations, corporations, local governments, and long-term investments
- Caveat - significant portion of operations funding realized as result CE funding
 - I.e., though money going to the LT is small portion of the total gathered to acquire easement, available only as part of that acquisition

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

10.

Securement
costs are
significant

- 14% and 22% of the entire project cost
- Land trusts face these costs even in case of a fully-donated conservation easement
- Mark of sector maturation that 'stewardship endowment' makes up 37-39% of the costs

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

11.

Long-term
financial
planning is
improving

- Of 30 revenue-generation mechanisms put forward, sector was using 23
- 70% indicated they had endowments, 40% had other long-term investments
- 80% had received major gifts, and 60% had received bequests

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

12.

Basis for
compensation
calculations is
robust

- Recent 'syndicate easement' scandal in U.S. re falsely inflated valuations of CEs
- Alberta land trust sector well-insulated against this for three reasons:
 - First, landowners (currently) significantly motivated by conservation goals vs monetary
 - Second, compensation values for 90% of organizations set using qualified appraisers
 - Third, 69% of CE acres certified as EcoGifts, which requires panel review of appraisals

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

13.

Charitable tax receipts are critical

- 82% of conservation easement grant acres were compensated via a tax receipt
 - 32% wholly a tax receipt
 - 51% as split receipt
- Half of land trusts provide only tax receipts as compensation
- Beyond misconceptions around limited usability of tax receipts, this research indicates they are still critical

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

14.

Landowner
conservation
values are
paramount

- When surveying ALL landowners about CEs, compensation figures highly, but ...
- When considering landowners who actually work with land trusts, different picture
- Top rated motivation was '*Ability to address their nature conservation goals*'

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?

Emergent themes

14.

Landowner
conservation
values are
paramount

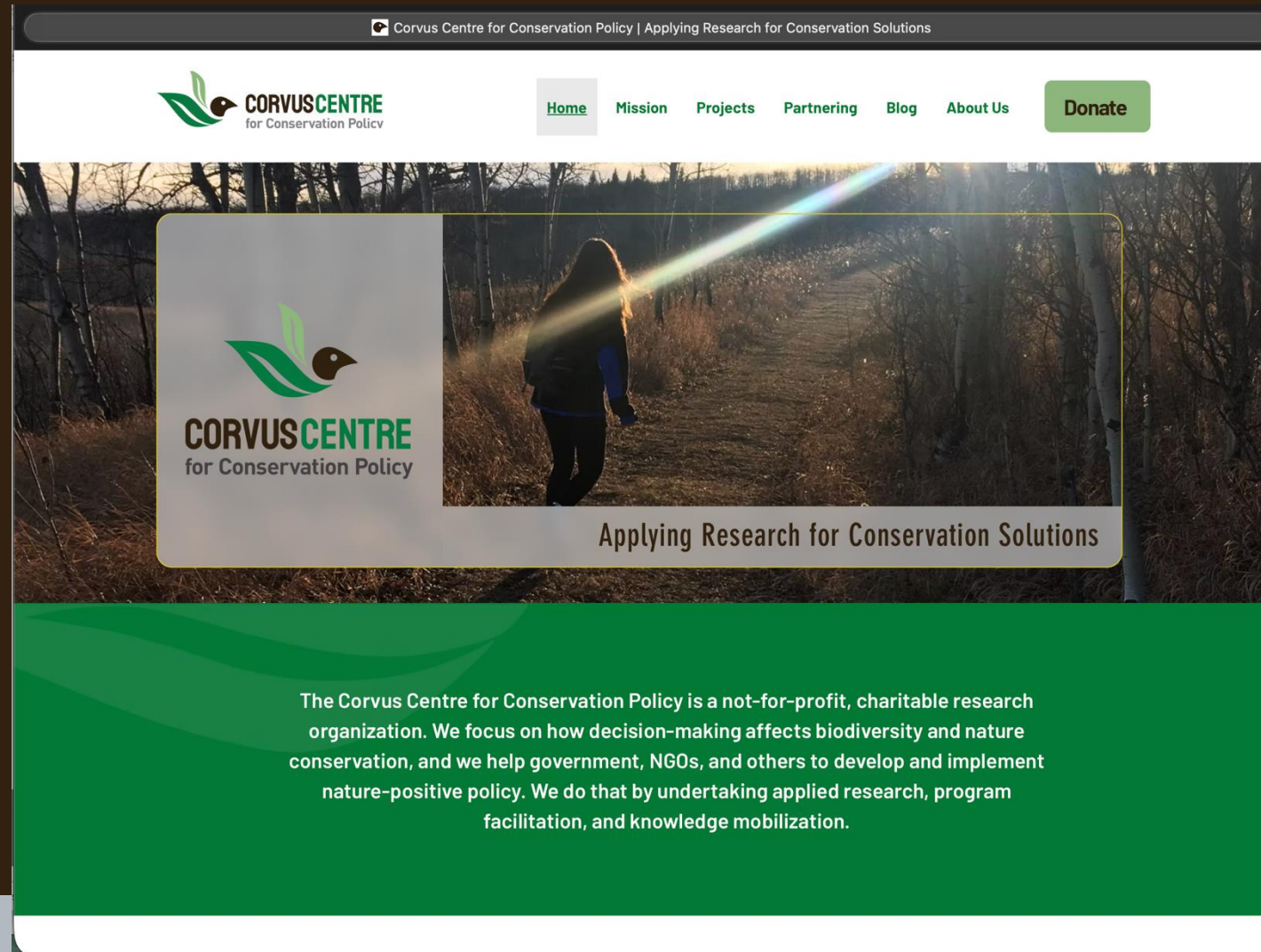
- Next were
 - 'Impact on operations'
 - 'Support/agreement of family,'
 - Conservation easement 'agreement conditions',
 - 'Ability to commit only a portion of their acres.'
- Only then did '*Compensation amount*' appear on the list
- Two more items until '*Agreement term*'

**Where is the
report?**



WHERE IS THE REPORT

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