

Angler awareness and use of best release practices for reef fish in the Gulf



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- Research designed to collect baseline information from Gulf of Mexico reef anglers:
 - Type of angler
 - Angler demographics
 - Reef fishing frequency, how, and where people fish (e.g., state, depth)
 - Awareness of barotrauma symptoms
 - Knowledge and use of best handling practices
 - Theory of Planned Behavior (attitudes, norms, controls, behavior)
 - State-specific questions (AL, MS)
- Part of the larger, “Return ‘Em Right” outreach program through Florida Sea Grant.
- Cross-sectional design – surveys conducted 2022 and 2024 to measure effectiveness of Return ‘Em Right program.

A lot to take into account ...

- Different survey populations:
 - NOAA RCG
 - State for-hire
 - **Private recreational – Focus today**
- States regulate differently
 - AL - \$10 reef fish endorsement
 - FL – Free reef angler designation
 - LA – Free Rec Offshore Landing Permit (ROLP)
 - MS – ROLP (new since 2022)
 - TX – No special requirement
- All 5 states have different reef fishing seasons



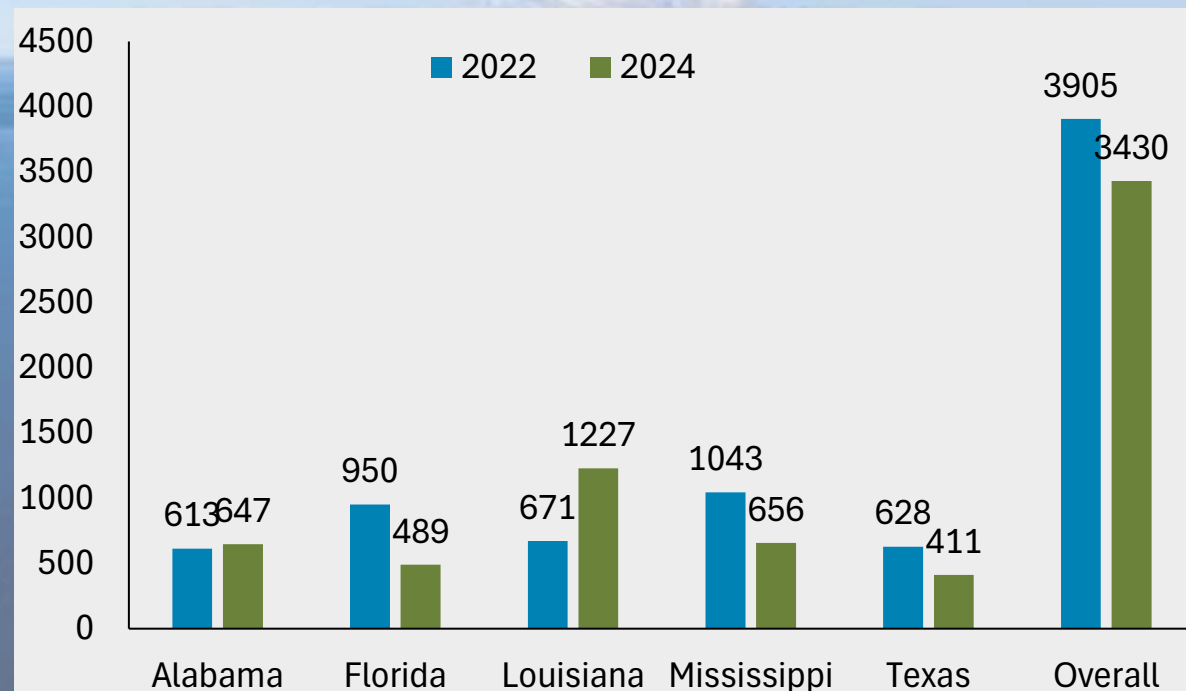
When to send a survey?

Reef fishing seasons that change annually:

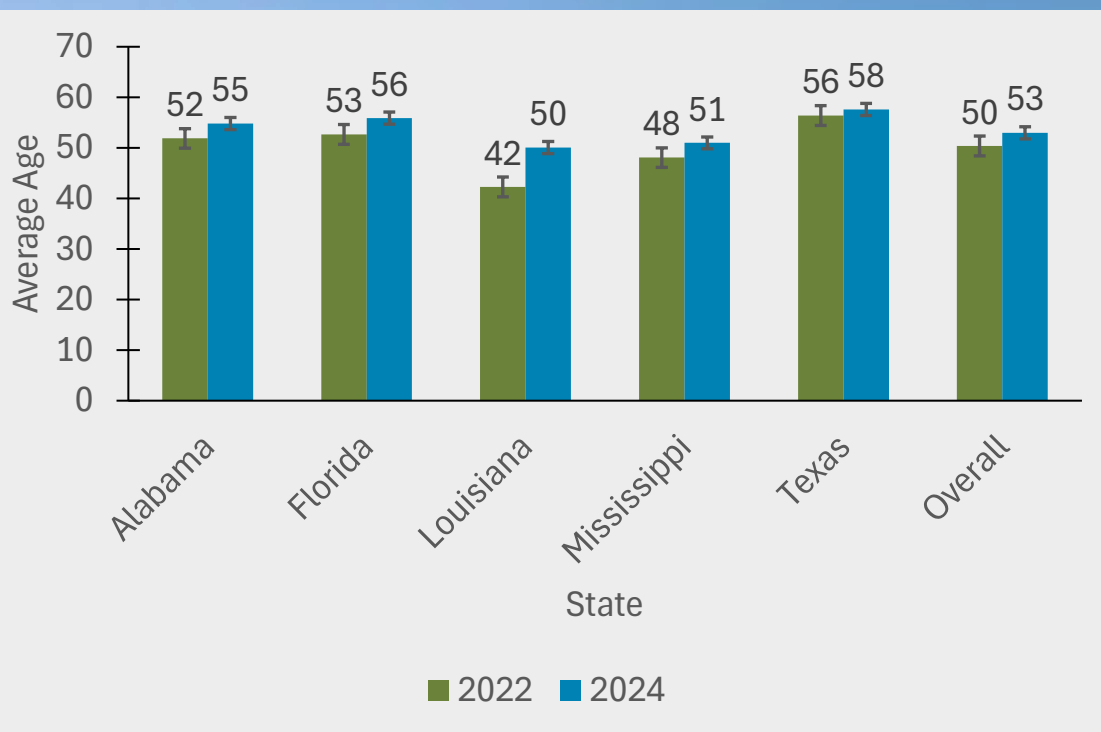
- **Alabama.** May 24 – Dec 30, Friday - Monday
- **Florida.** June 1 to July 31, Sept. 1 – Nov. 30 on 3-day weekends. Also Labor Day, Veterans Day, and Thanksgiving Day.
- **Louisiana.** Monday, April 15, 2024, closed July 7-12, reopened as a weekends only July 19 until August 19, then opened daily until October 6.
- **Mississippi.** May 24 – July 7, 2024
- **Texas.** Every day from June 1 to August 28, 2024.
- **Federal.** Every day from June 1 – August 28, November 18, 2024 to January 1, 2025

Methods – both surveys

- Targeted response = 400 / state
 - Full state data for AL, FL
 - Used boats $\geq 24'$ for Texas (followed Schuette et al.)
 - LA, MS sent the survey from their systems
- Contacted NOAA RCG 5 times, Rec respondents 2-3 (LA, MS) or 5 (AL, FL, TX) times
- 2022 n = 3,905
- 2024 n = 3,430



Demographics



2022

- 91% male, 95% White/Caucasian
- 2.3% Hispanic/Latino

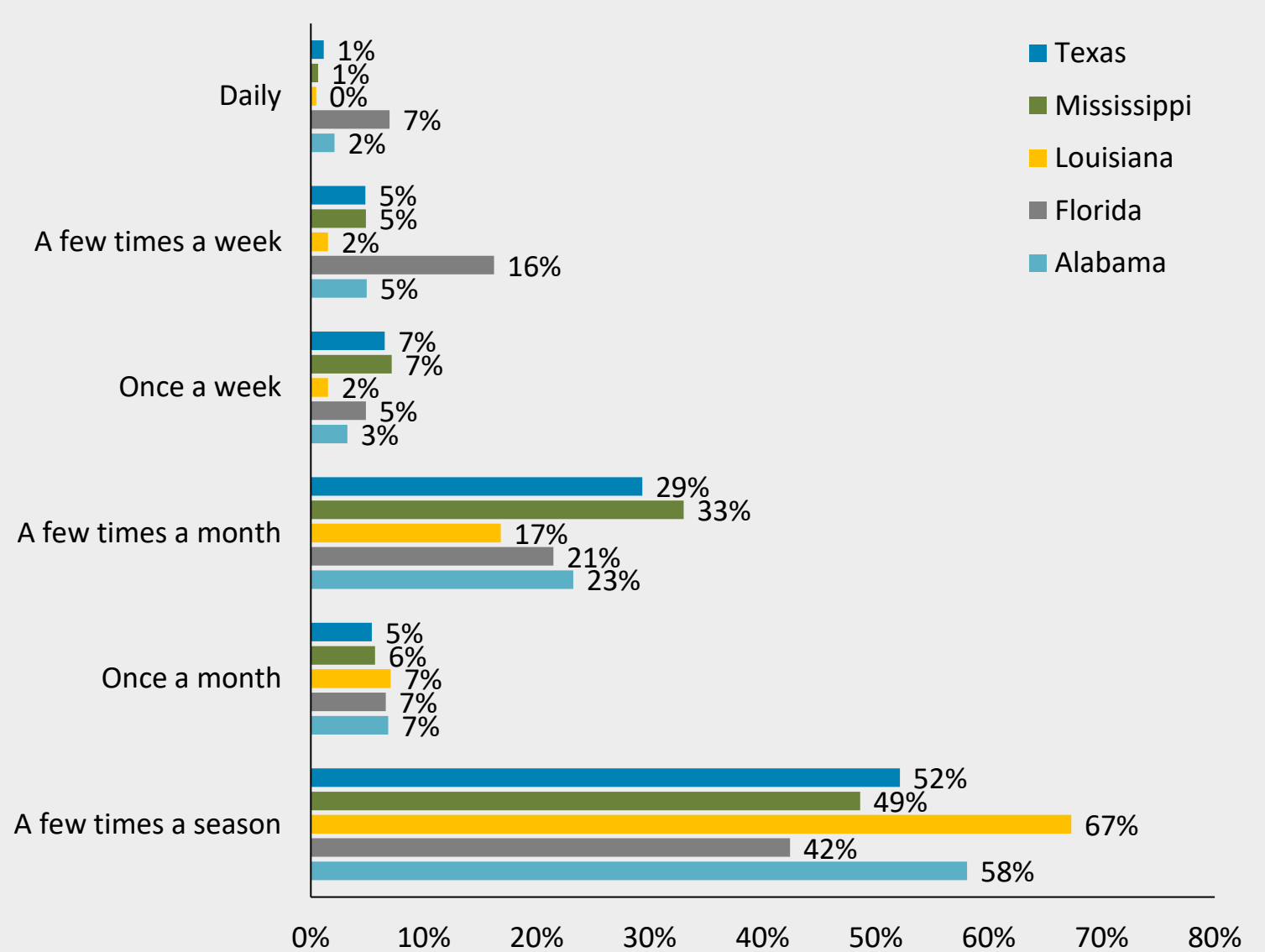
2024

- 91% male, 91% White/Caucasian
- 1.4% Hispanic/Latino

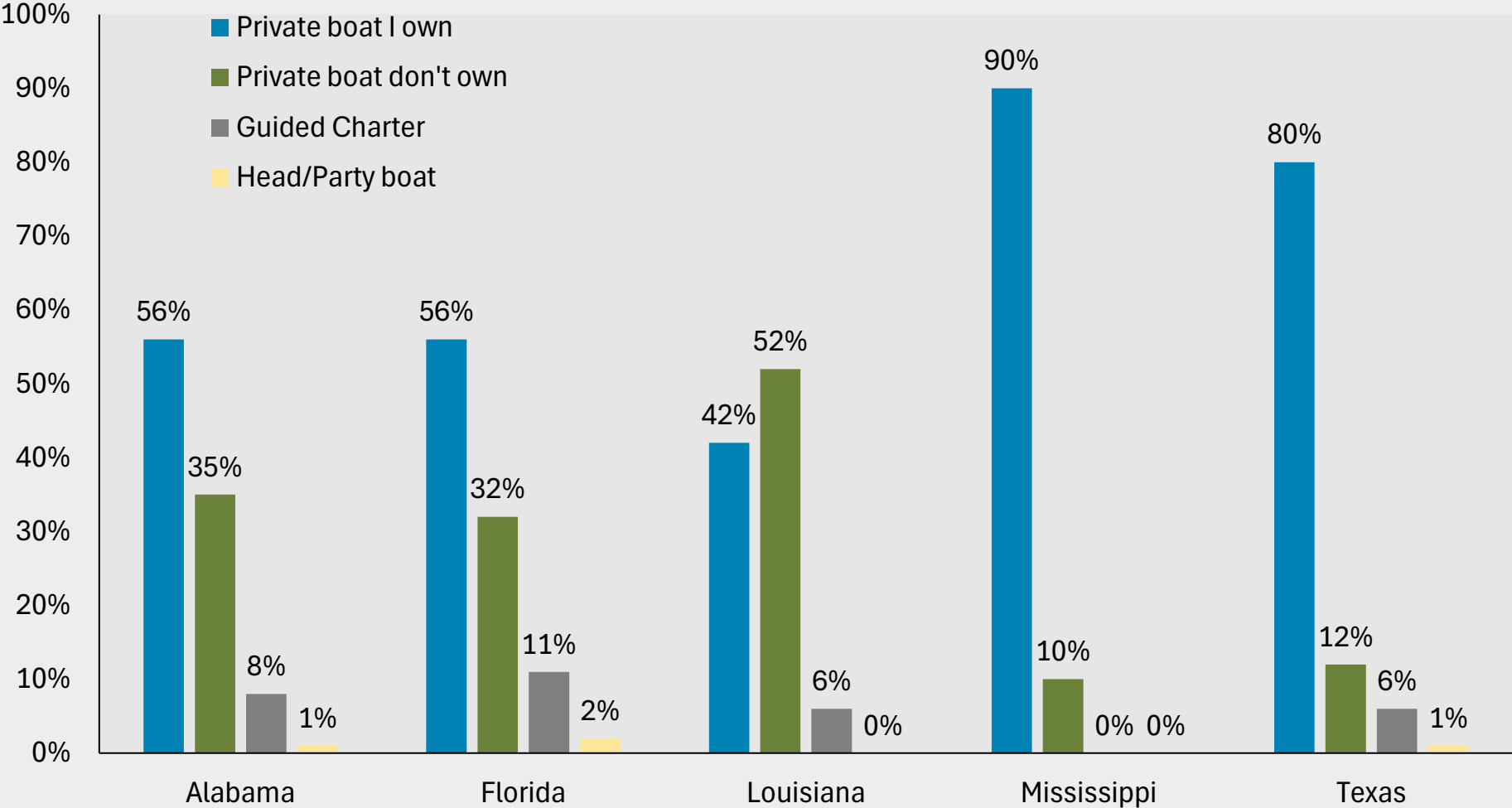
Priv. Rec. Anglers:

- 32% had ≤ 5 years experience
- 60% fished only a few times a season
- 72% fished at depths $>60'$
- 6% said they fished on a charter

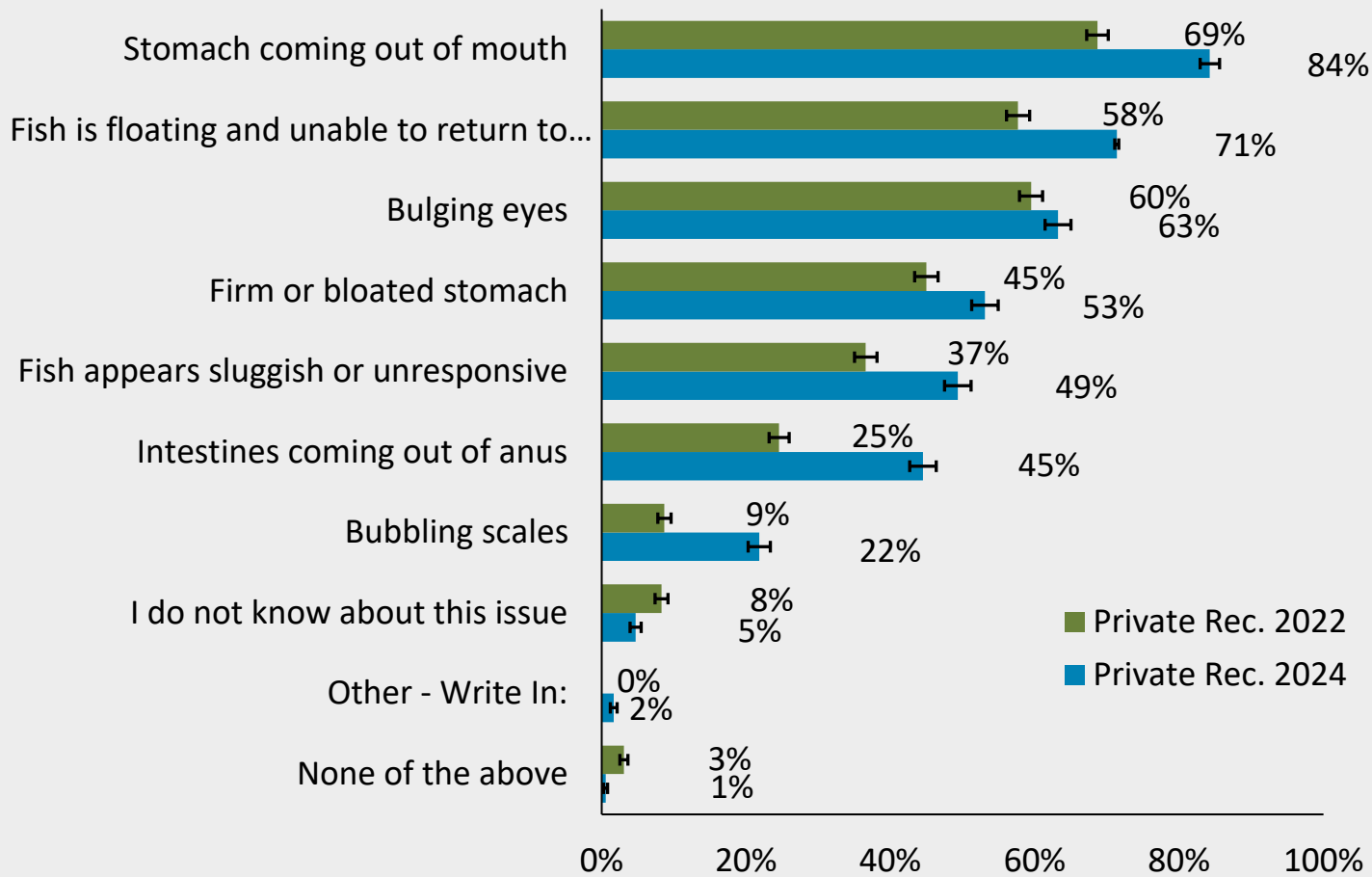
Fishing Frequency



Boat Type



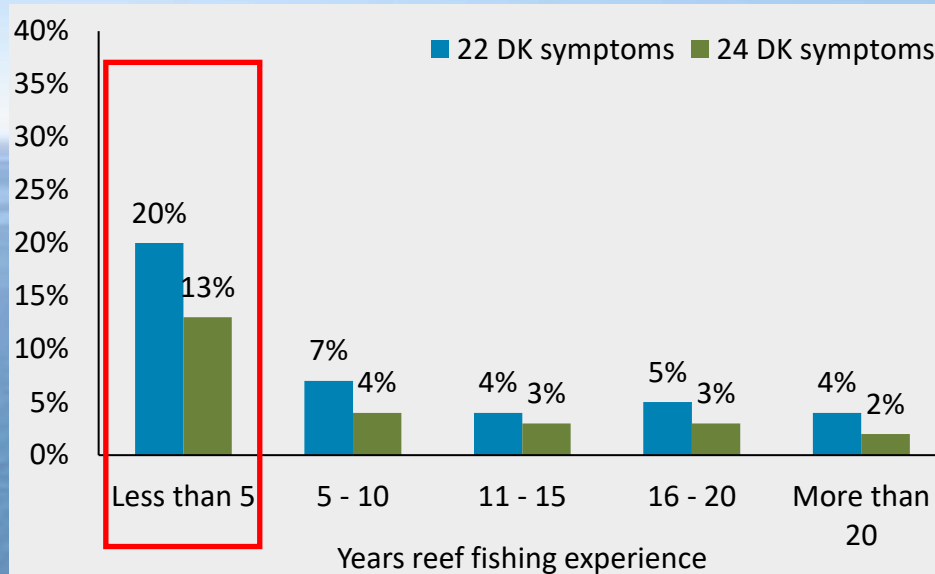
Barotrauma Symptoms 2022 vs. 2024



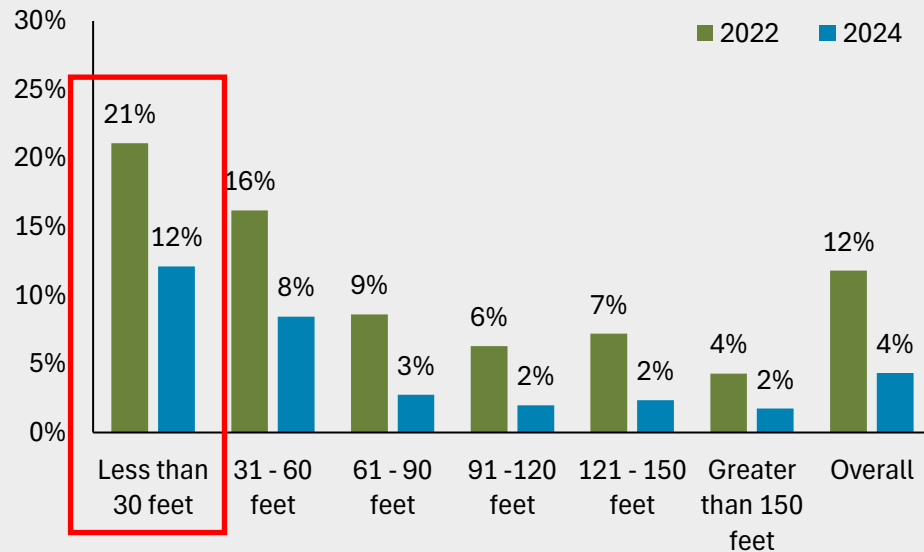
What influences barotrauma knowledge?

- Patterns held between years
 - Less experienced
 - Fished shallow depths
- Percentage of people without barotrauma knowledge decreased 2022 vs. 2024
- Shallow anglers were 'least' aware, but lower than 2022

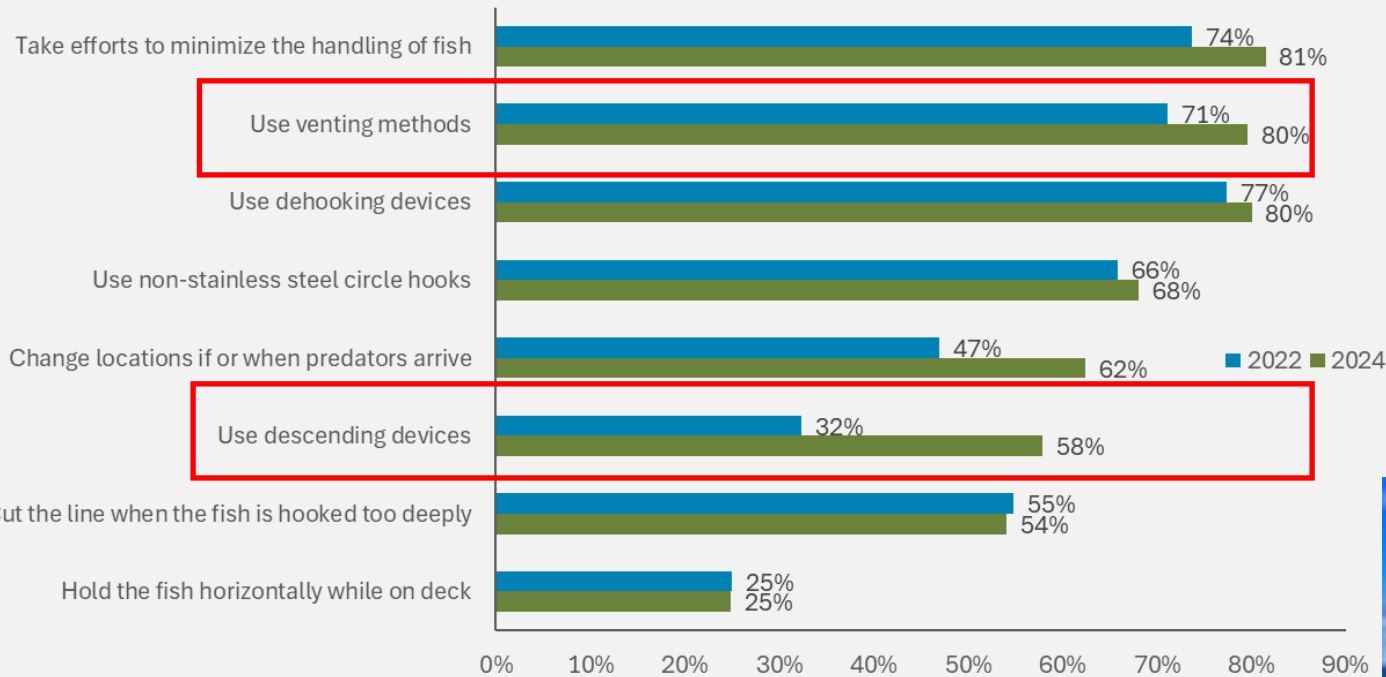
Years of experience



Fishing Depth (most often)



Best handling practices - Awareness



- Slight increase in % who know about minimizing handling and venting
- Large increase in % aware about FDDs

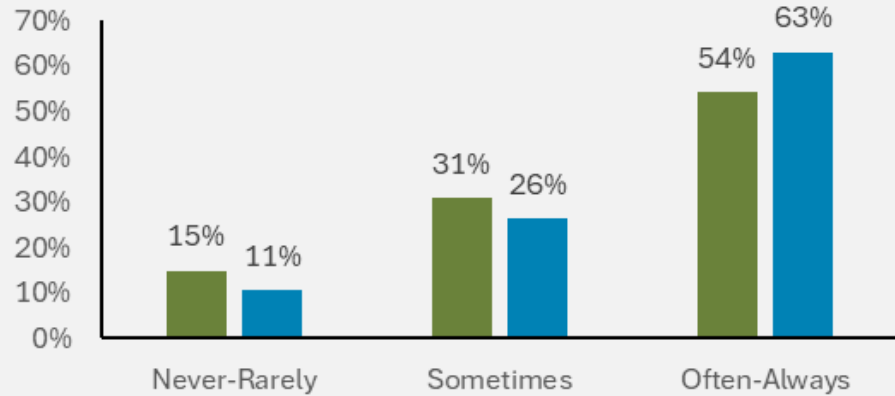


Use of Venting Methods and FDDs

*Only for people who were aware of the method

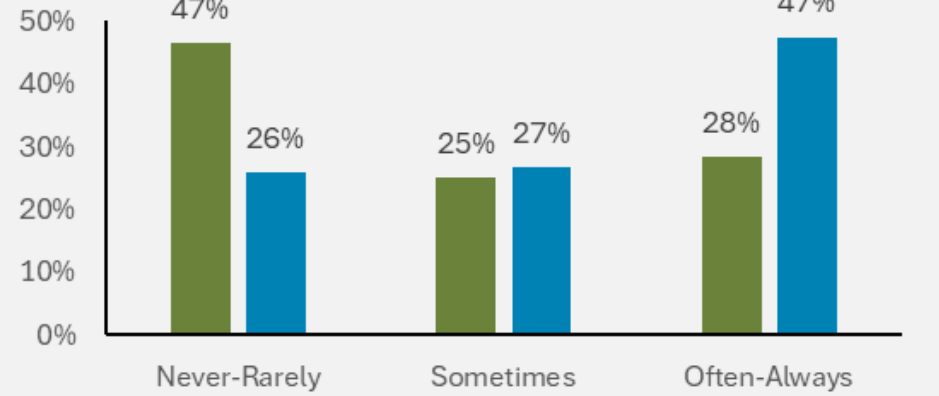
Venting Methods

■ 2022 ■ 2024

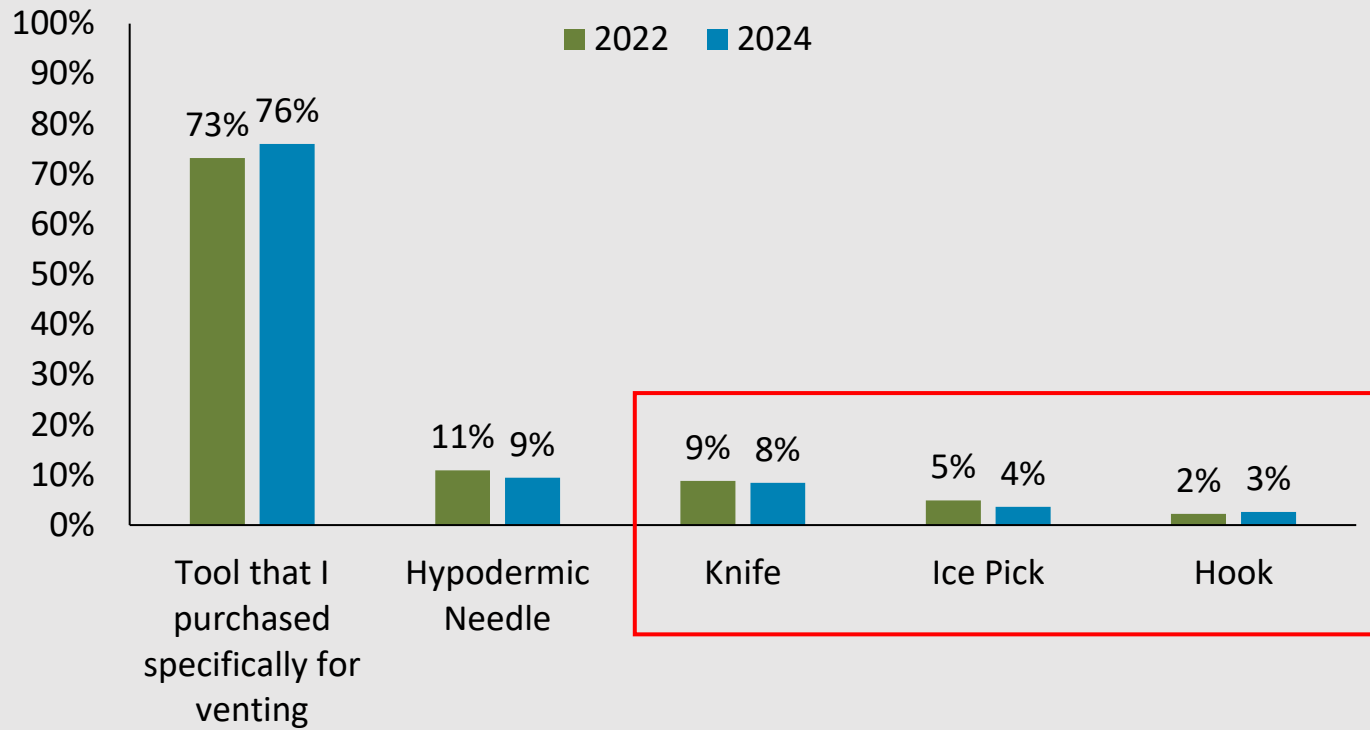


Descending Devices

■ 2022 ■ 2024



Tools used to vent fish



Not legal	Use
2022	15%
2024	16%

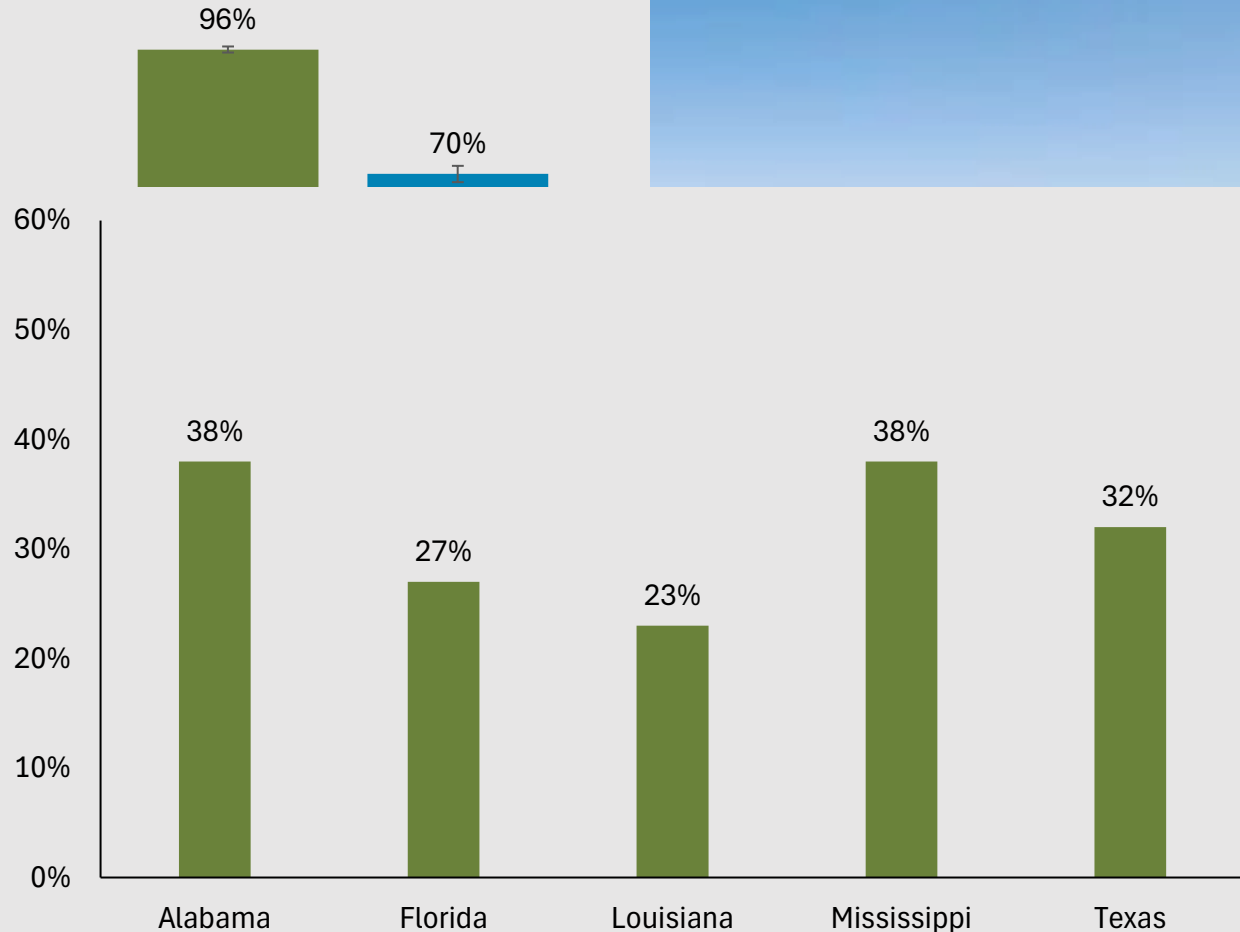
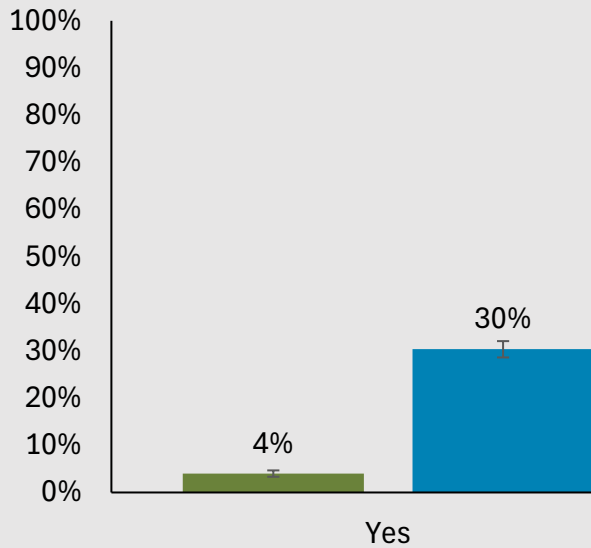


What about Return 'Em Right?

- 2022 survey launched around the same time as RER.

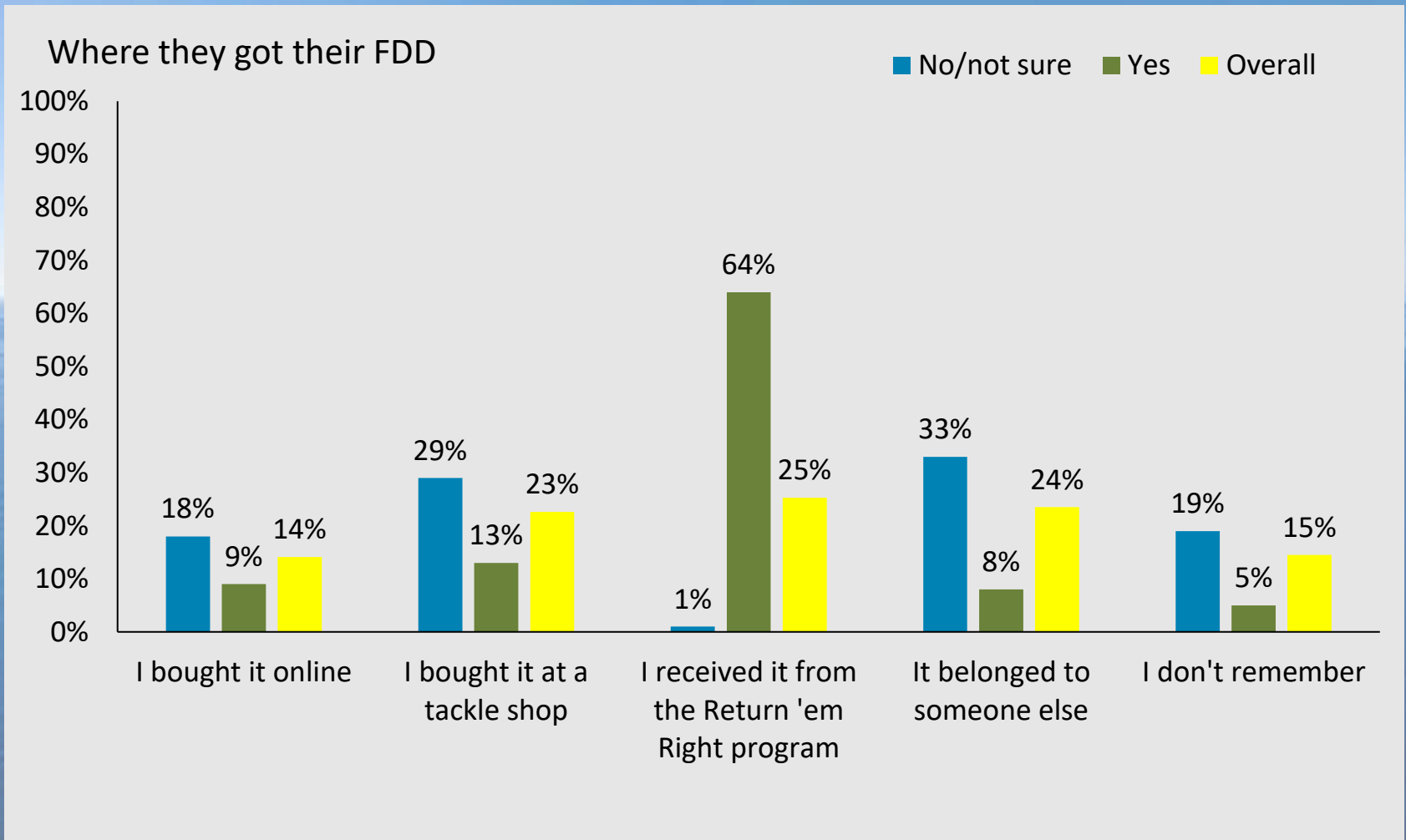
Have you heard of "Return' Em Right"

■ 2022 ■ 2024



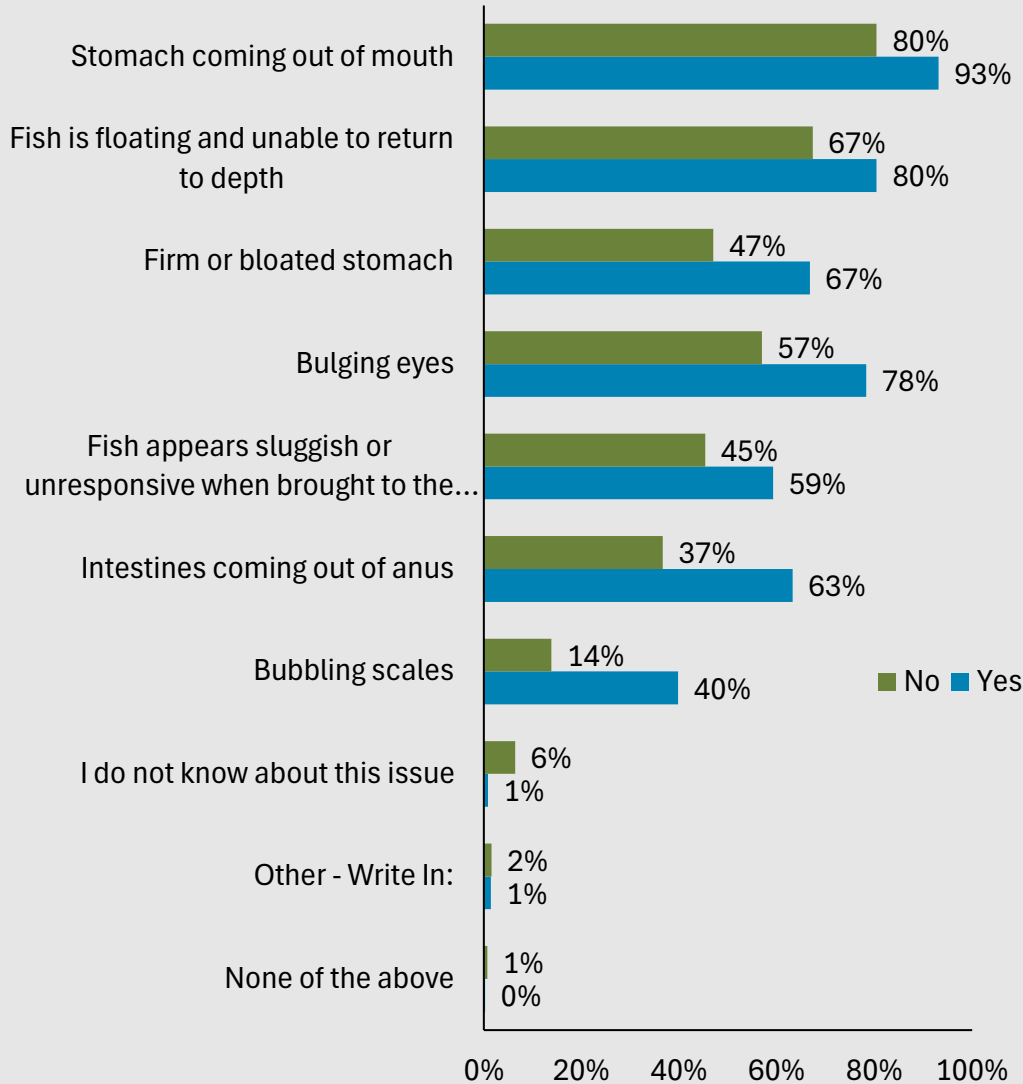
What about Return 'Em Right?

- 2022 launched around the same time as RER
- 30% aware of the program
- Distributed 40,000 FDDs – shows up in the data



What about Return 'Em Right?

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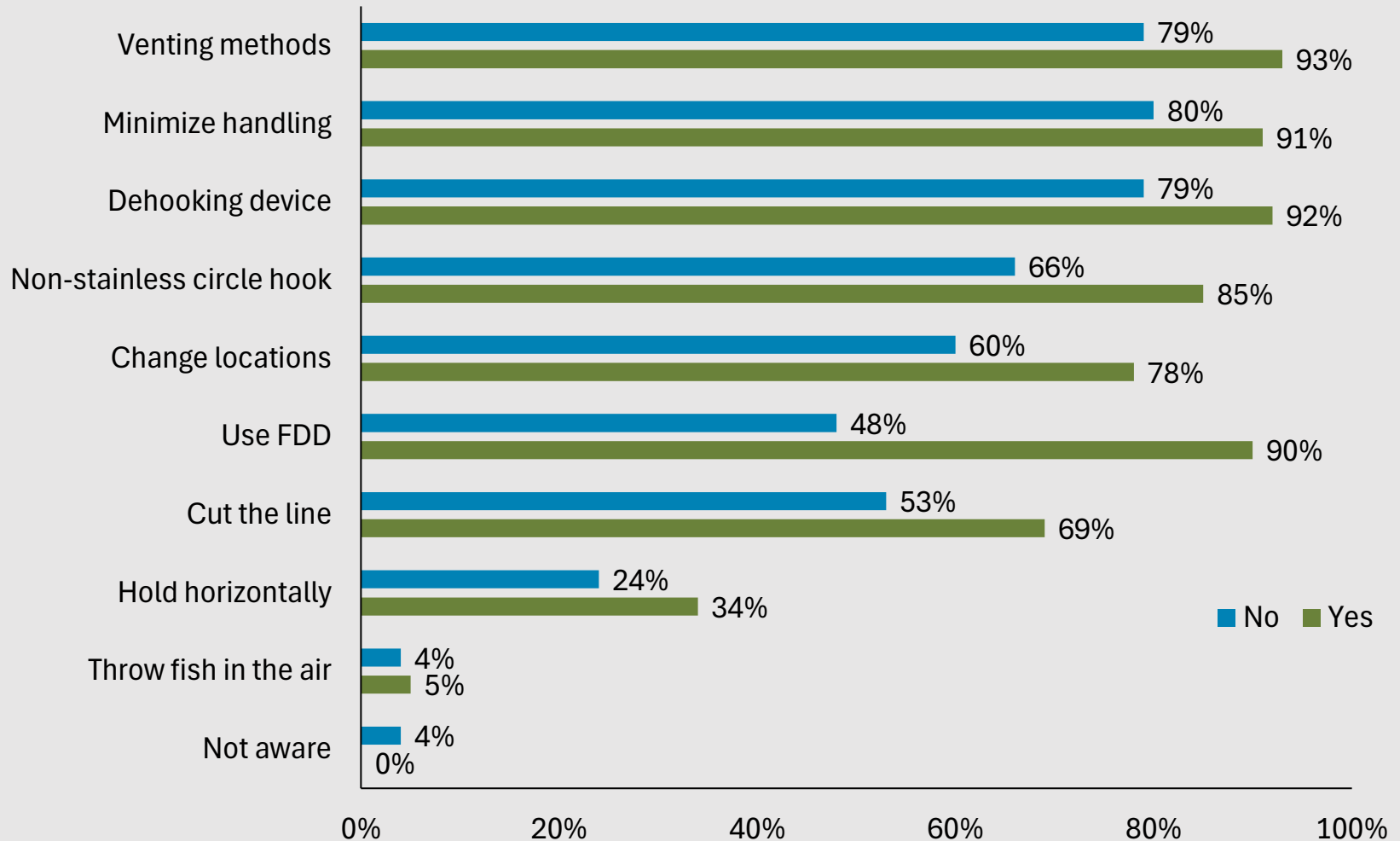


- Greater recognition of barotrauma symptoms

What about Return 'Em Right?

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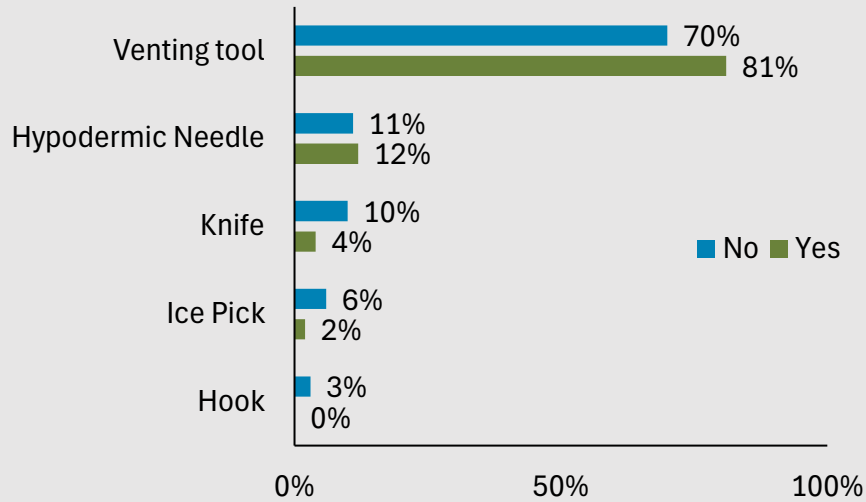
Knowledge of best handling practice



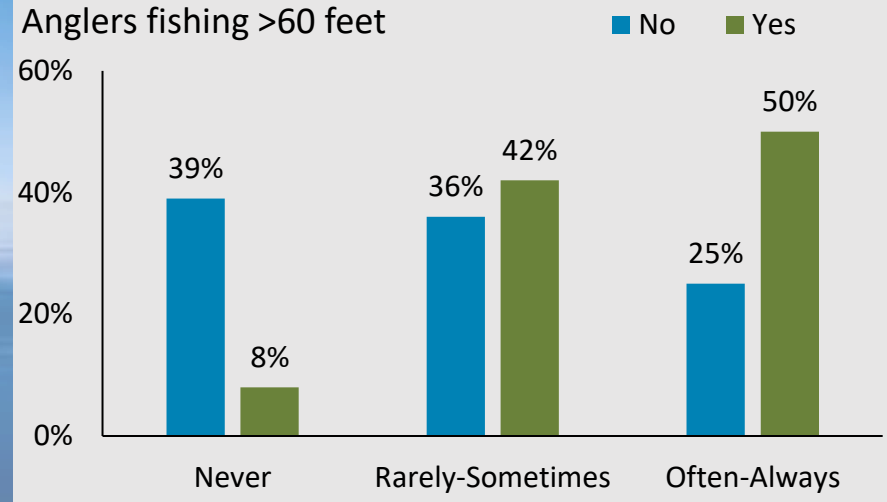
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Venting Tool Type

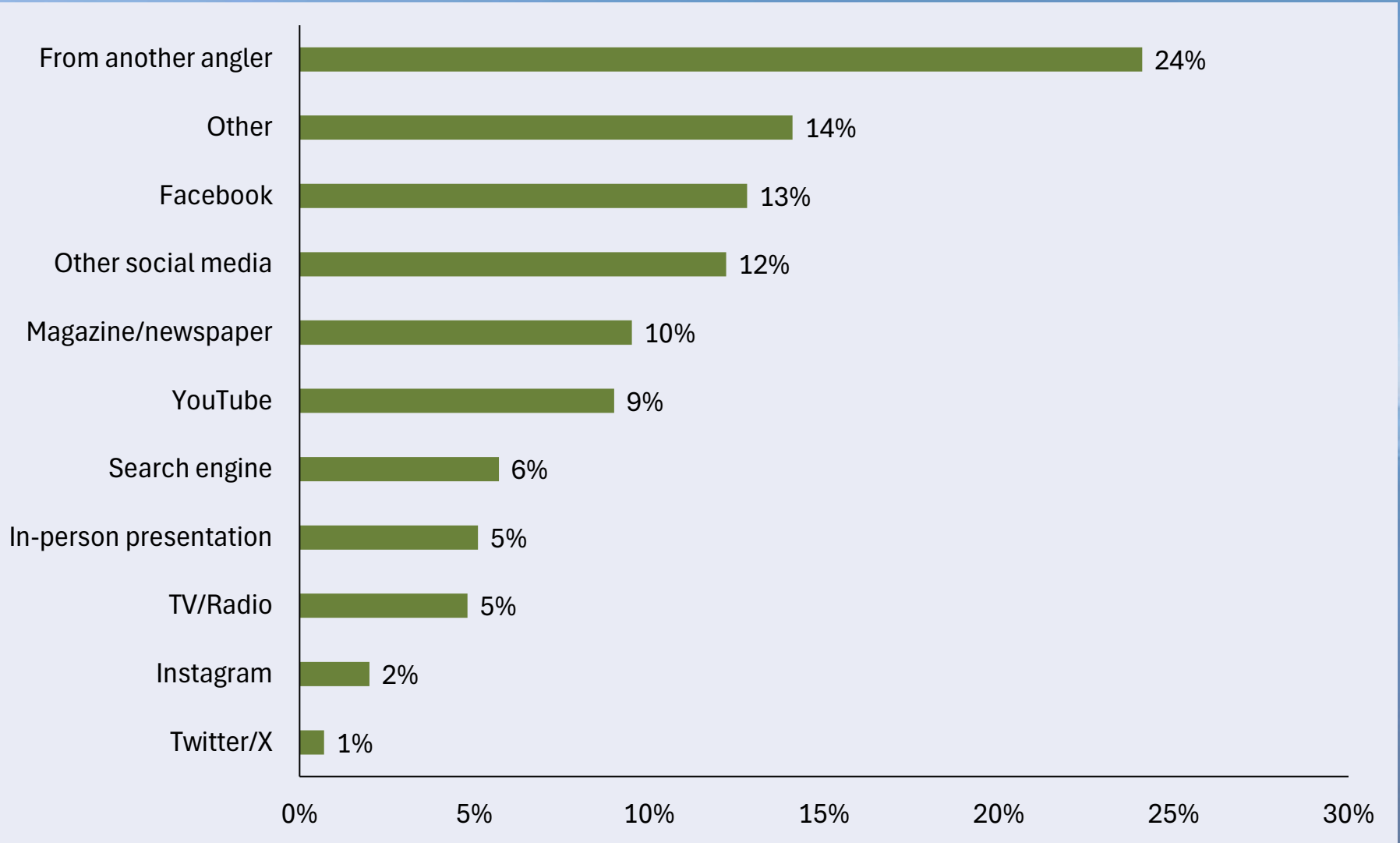


FDD Use



Heard of RER	Knife, ice pick, hook use
Yes	6%
No	19%

Where did they hear about RER?



Conclusions

- State-level data (>400 responses per state)
- Good Outreach opportunities:
 - New anglers are low hanging fruit
 - For anglers who fish in shallow water, can still do outreach on handling practices that increase survival
 - A lot of angler's fish from boats they don't own. Continue to work with boat owners who can educate fishing partners
 - 30% of respondents knew about RER
 - Differences:
 - Symptoms – more knowledge
 - Best handling practices – use more often
 - What venting tool to not use
 - Anglers in >60' more likely to use FDD at least rarely (92% vs 61%)
 - They got their RER information from other anglers and social media – need to dig into 'other'
 - Data suggests RER has positively influenced knowledge and behavior.
 - Survey worth repeating in a couple of years.



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Questions?

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