

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SURVEY 2006: RESIDENTS ARE CONCERNED ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Kim Haselhoff,

Post Doctoral Fellow, Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies

Paul Ong,

Professor of Urban Planning, Social Welfare, and Asian American Studies, UCLA

California has long been a leader when it comes to environmental issues. More recently, however, there have been several ambitious initiatives at the state and local level that will keep the state at the forefront of environmental innovation. The Southern California Survey 2006 found that public opinion in the region is quite consistent with this level of environmental problem solving, as concern about the environment, particularly air and water quality, is high.

Public opinion surveys can play an important role in decision making as they gather information that complements data from standard sources such as the Decennial Census and Current Population Survey. This chapter presents findings from a recently completed survey of Southern California residents (those living in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura). Details of the survey can be found in the appendix. The information from the survey can help better inform elected officials about the public's concerns and priorities.

Residents express significant concern over the environment, air pollution in particular, and also are worried about the effect on the health of their families. Respondents give local government mixed reviews when it comes to environmental protection, but the level of concern is consistent with the support for bold new initiatives at the state level, and indicates potential support for future environmental programs.

Public Concerns About The Environment and Level of Involvement

When asked to name the three most important problems in Southern California, respondents rated the environment as the third most important problem in the region in 2006. About 60 percent of the responses that identified pollution as a concern also identified air pollution as the more specific concern. When asked to name the most important *environmental* issue facing Southern California today, 50 percent of respondents chose air pollution as the most serious concern, far exceeding any other response (see Figure 1).

The survey also asked whether air pollution in Southern California is generally worse, the same, or better than it was five years ago. Only a quarter of respondents feel the air is generally better than five years ago, while 35 percent said the same and 36 percent said worse. A similar question was asked on a Southern California Social Survey in 1984, specifically, whether the pollution situation was generally worse, the

same or better than five years ago, and results indicated people perceived better results 20 years ago than today. In 1984, 36 percent of respondents thought the pollution situation was better, 41 percent said the same, and only 19 percent said worse (see Figure 2).

The current Southern California Survey (SCS) also found that 81 percent of respondents are somewhat or very worried about the effects of pollution on the health and well being of their families. Only 18 percent reported not being worried at all (see Figure 3). Despite this level of concern with environmental conditions, involvement in environmental activities is not overwhelming. Overall, only about one in four residents directly supported environmental groups or causes. While only a small percentage have belonged to an environmental group or volunteered to work on an environmental issue in the past 12 months, almost 20 percent have donated money to an environmental organization (see Figure 4).

Public Concern and Involvement By Demographic Groups

A breakdown of these questions by education and income levels, ethnicity, age, and area of the region indicate that perceptions of the air pollution situation and level of involvement in environmental causes varies by group. Young people are most likely to say that air pollution is worse now than five years ago, while those in the oldest age group are actually most likely to say it has improved. One plausible explanation is that older residents have witnessed the more dramatic improvements from 20 years ago than over the past few years.

Dissatisfaction with air quality is also higher among those with lower levels of education, lower incomes, and Latinos (see Figure 5). This may be due to the air quality differences between higher and lower income areas of the region. Opinions vary by county as well, with residents of Los Angeles and Riverside counties indicating the least improvement. Riverside county residents were most likely to say that air quality has declined. Almost 45 percent of respondents in Riverside said the air was generally worse, while only 20 percent said it had improved. In Ventura, respondents were most likely to report improvement, with 35 percent of respondents indicating that the air was generally better (see Figure 6).

Levels of involvement in environmental causes also vary by group. Not surprisingly, respondents with higher levels of education and income are more likely to belong to an environmental organization, or volunteer for, or donate money to, an environmental cause. While only 19 percent of those with a high school degree or less reported doing any of these things in the past 12 months, 43 percent of those with a bachelor's degree or higher did so. Among ethnic groups, whites were most likely to be involved; 37 percent of whites had done at least one of the above, while only 20 percent of Latinos reported doing so.

Water Pollution and Drinking Water

Southern California residents rated water pollution as the second most important environmental concern in the region today. Although a much greater percentage of respondents are concerned with air pollution as the most important environmental problem in the region, there is concern that water quality has declined more than air quality over the past five years (see Figure 7). Over 40 percent of respondents think that water pollution is generally worse today than five years ago, while only 13 percent think it is better, and 34 percent believe it is about the same.

Concerns about water quality may be why 56 percent of Southern California residents now drink bottled water, or other drinks from containers, and 30 percent drink filtered tap water (only 14 percent drink straight tap water – see Figure 8). We found that 62 percent of respondents who are “very worried” about the effects of pollution on the health of their family drink bottled water, versus only 51 percent of those who are not worried at all. However bottled water consumption has been increasing nationwide, with the U.S. leading the world as the largest consumer of bottled water according to the Earth Policy Institute (2006).

In 1999 the NRDC reported that more than 50 percent of Americans were drinking bottled water (a number which has surely increased), indicating that consumption in the region is fairly inline with the rest of the country. Those most likely to drink tap water in Southern California include younger residents (18-35), those with the lowest levels of education and income, and Latinos. Those in Los Angeles County are also just slightly more likely to drink bottled water than residents in other areas. Interestingly, opinions on the change in water quality over the past five years do not differ nearly as much by groups as they do with air pollution.

Water Pollution at the Beach

Beaches are a major amenity in Southern California, so pollution at the beach is an important concern. Almost 50 percent of respondents feel that water pollution at the beach is very serious, and another 36 percent feel it is moderately serious (see Figure 9). Statewide, the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) recently found similar results in February 2006. Fifty percent of respondents think ocean and beach pollution is a big problem, and an additional 35 percent think it is somewhat of a problem.

Interestingly, the SCS found that those who never go to the beach, or those who have not been to the beach for more than a year were more likely to believe that pollution there is very serious than those who have been to the beach more recently. In contrast, PPIC found virtually no difference among those who have and have not been in California’s bays or oceans in the past year. This discrepancy may be a result of increased media coverage of beach pollution in Southern California, including listing beach

closures due to pollution. However Southern California beachgoers were more supportive when asked if they would pay to clean up water pollution.

The SCS and PPIC survey both asked about paying to clean up urban water before it reaches the ocean. In Southern California support was not particularly high. When asked if they would support three different measures – passing a bond, paying an annual tax, or paying a fee at the beach – only 38% of respondents supported paying a fee, 37 % supported passing a bond, and 31% supported paying an annual tax. Those who reported visiting the beach within the last week were generally 11-16 % more supportive of the various options than those who never visit the beach (see Figure 10). PPIC asked a more general question about reducing ocean and beach pollution from streets and storm drains even if it means paying higher fees or taxes. Support was much higher, as 71% of respondents “favored” such an action.

Reclaimed Water

One of the problems Southern California faces as the region continues to grow is the potential dwindling supply of water. While the region mainly relies on imported water (fifty percent of the local supply, according to the State Water Plan Update, December 2005), some local water agencies have developed state-of-the-art recycling programs that provide very high quality water. The SCS asked what uses respondents would support for reclaimed water. While just over half of respondents support using reclaimed water for agriculture irrigation and landscape irrigation (52% and 54%, respectively), support for commercial or industrial uses was a bit lower (45%) and support for residential use was only 27% (see Figure 11). Support for all uses of reclaimed water except residential use is significantly greater among those with higher education and income, and among whites than other ethnic groups.

Role of Government in the Environment

Residents are almost evenly split when asked about the performance of their elected officials in protecting the environment. About a third of respondents feel these officials have done a generally inadequate job, while about 30 percent said mixed, and another 30 percent said generally adequate. In 1984 residents were asked a slightly different question, whether state and local governments were spending too much, too little, or about the right amount on improving and protecting the environment. Over half of respondents (55%) said government was spending too little.

The 2006 SCS also asked whether current environmental protection regulations have not gone far enough, are just about right, or have gone too far. The same question was also asked in 1984. Responses are compared on Figure 12. Residents in 2006 were slightly more satisfied with environmental regulations today than they were 22 years

before, but not by much. Almost half of respondents still think that environmental regulations have not gone far enough.

To determine whether feelings about environmental regulations are driven by personal concerns over pollution we cross tabulated the results of these two questions. The results are displayed in Figure 13. Those who are most worried about the effects of pollution on the health and well being of their family are most likely to say that environmental regulations have not gone far enough – almost 70 percent think more could be done. Those who are somewhat worried are pretty evenly split between regulations not going far enough and being about right, while about half of those who are not worried at all tend to think the current level of regulation is adequate, with the other half split between regulations not going far enough and going too far.

In addition, those who think that environmental regulations have not gone far enough are also most likely to think that elected officials are not doing an adequate job in protecting the environment. Almost 50 percent of those who think more could be done to protect the environment also believe local officials are doing an inadequate job. Likewise, 44 percent of those who think environmental regulations have gone too far believe that officials are doing an adequate job of protecting the environment (see Figure 14).

Finally, the SCS asked about the effect of international trade, which is a major economic driver in the region, on the environment. Residents are pretty evenly split in their opinions here. About 28 percent believe trade can be good for the environment, 27 percent believe it has a mixed effect, while 25 percent say it is bad, and almost 20 percent did not know. Related to international trade is the issue of expanding the ports and airports in the region to handle the additional trade traffic. This involves an important tradeoff between the economic benefits of expansion and the environmental costs. When asked which should be given priority, a large majority said either the environment should be given priority (39 %) or both should be given equal priority (36%). Only 16 percent said economic growth should take precedence (see figure 15).

Policy Implications

The level of public concern over the environment is consistent with efforts at the state and local level to pursue environmental initiatives. Just recently (in August 2006) the state made an ambitious move to curb global warming, with the legislature passing the first bill in the U.S. to cap man-made greenhouse gas emissions. Governor Schwarzenegger subsequently signed the bill. Many observers claim that other states will follow California's lead in developing a clean energy market.

However, the state is not just a trend setter; it is also the world's 12th largest producer of greenhouse gases, which means the bill could have quite an impact. Part of the move to reduce greenhouse gases included passage of the Governor's Million Solar Roofs Plan, which will lead to one million solar roofs in California by 2018. At the local

level, the City of Los Angeles recently renewed credits for Department of Water and Power customers who install solar panels.

California has also been at the forefront of the move to use hybrid cars, allowing them in the in the carpool lanes on freeways as an incentive for people to buy the fuel saving, low-emission vehicles. In 2005, the SCS found significant support for hybrid ownership, even before the hike in gasoline prices in 2006. Our results indicated that two in five residents were willing to pay more for a hybrid, and about one quarter were willing to pay at least 10 percent more for one (SCS Fact Sheet vol. 1. no. 5, 2005).

Despite the growing concern about the environment, the state's voters split on two environmentally oriented propositions in November 2006. Proposition 84 is a bond that would pay for water quality, safety, and supply, which will help insure clean, safe drinking water, as well as support projects vital to coastal protection and water quality. A majority of the voters (53.8%) supported this initiative. The more controversial initiative, Proposition 87, proposed to tax oil companies to pay for cleaner, cheaper energy research, and included a \$4 billion program to reduce petroleum consumption through incentives for alternative energy education and training. This proposition was vigorously opposed by the energy industry, which argued that the proposition would hurt the state economically and that the proposed programs lacked accountability. In the end, a majority (54.6%) voted against the initiative. The lesson appears that there is support for increasing the government's role in addressing environmental issues, but that enacting laws will not be without controversies. Public policy in this arena needs to be carefully formulated to receive voter support.

Conclusion

Southern California residents are clearly concerned with improving the environment, including cleaning the air, and improving water pollution in the region, both at home and at the beach. Opinions on improvements in air pollution over the past five years vary by demographic groups, but overall the percentage that says the air is better today than five years ago is fairly low. The percentage that sees improvements in water pollution is even lower. As the region becomes more crowded and competition for clean water grows, it will be important for residents to know more about water so they can make informed choices from among the many options available to meet the region's demand.

Residents are fairly split on the performance of elected officials in improving and protecting the environment. But almost half believe local environmental regulations have not gone far enough, and those who are most worried about the effects of pollution on their families' health are most dissatisfied with current environmental regulations. Despite this significant level of concern with the environment, direct support of environmental causes is not overwhelming. Only about one in four residents has belonged to an environmental group, donated money, or volunteered to work on an environmental issue in the past 12 months.

In at least one particular area (airport/port expansion) residents are willing to protect the environment at the cost of economic growth, or at least attempt to balance the two more evenly. Given the current level of public concern in the region, Southern California officials may also want to take this opportunity to improve environmental conditions whenever possible.

Figure 1: Top Three Environmental Issues Facing So. Cal Today
Cal Today
(Percent choosing each issue)

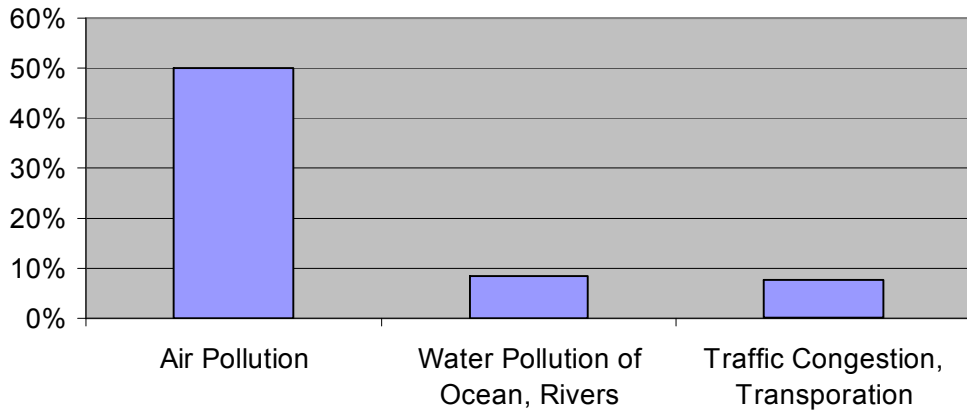


Figure 2: Compared to the situation five years ago do you think the pollution situation in So. Cal is...

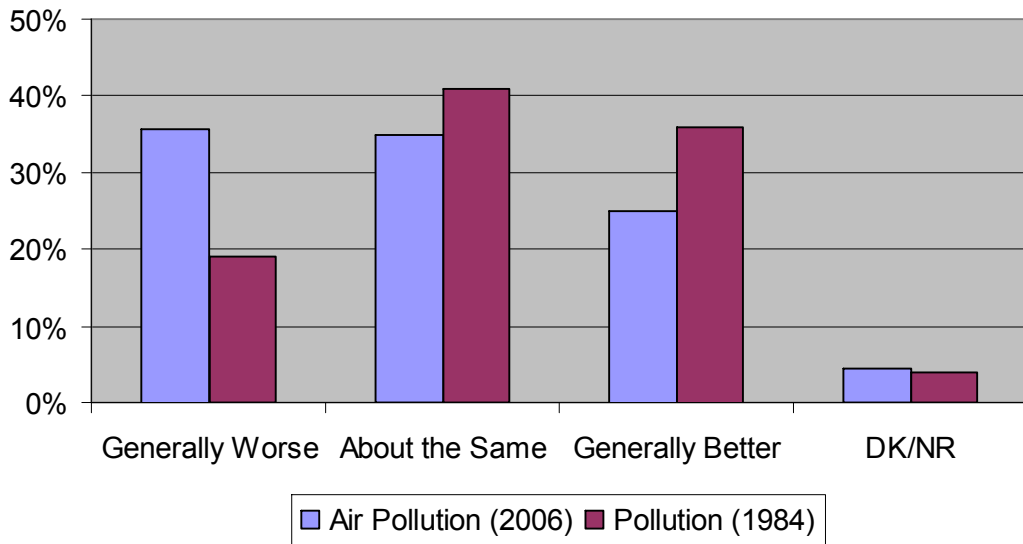


Figure 3: How worried are you about the effects of pollution on the health and well-being of your family?

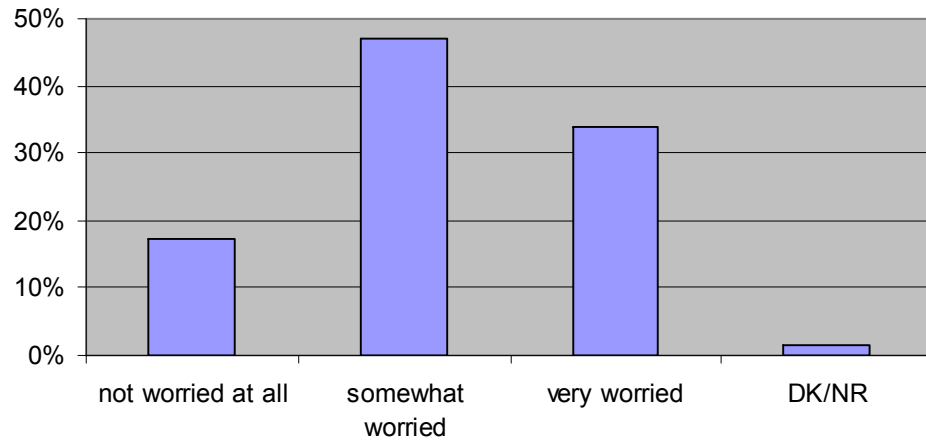


Figure 4: Involvement in Environmental Causes in Past Twelve Months

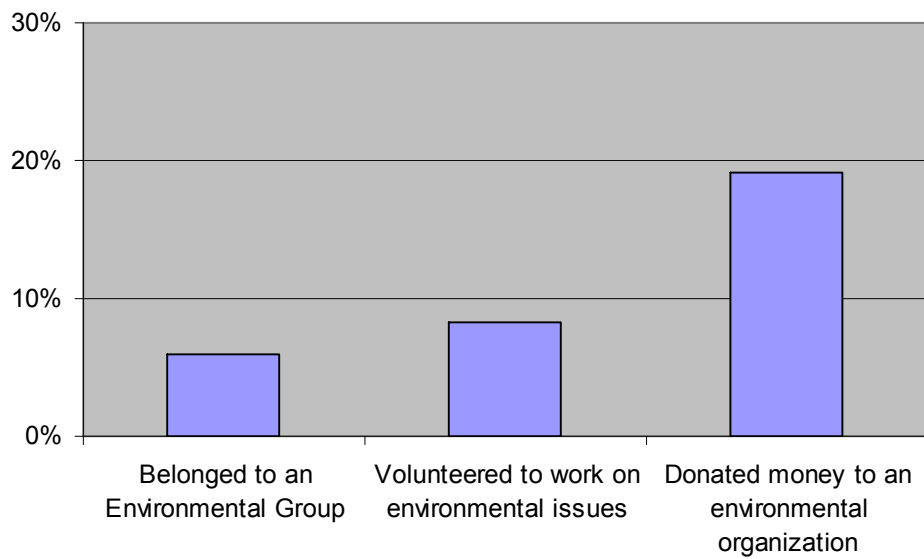


Figure 5: Compared to five years ago do you think the air pollution situation in Southern California is...

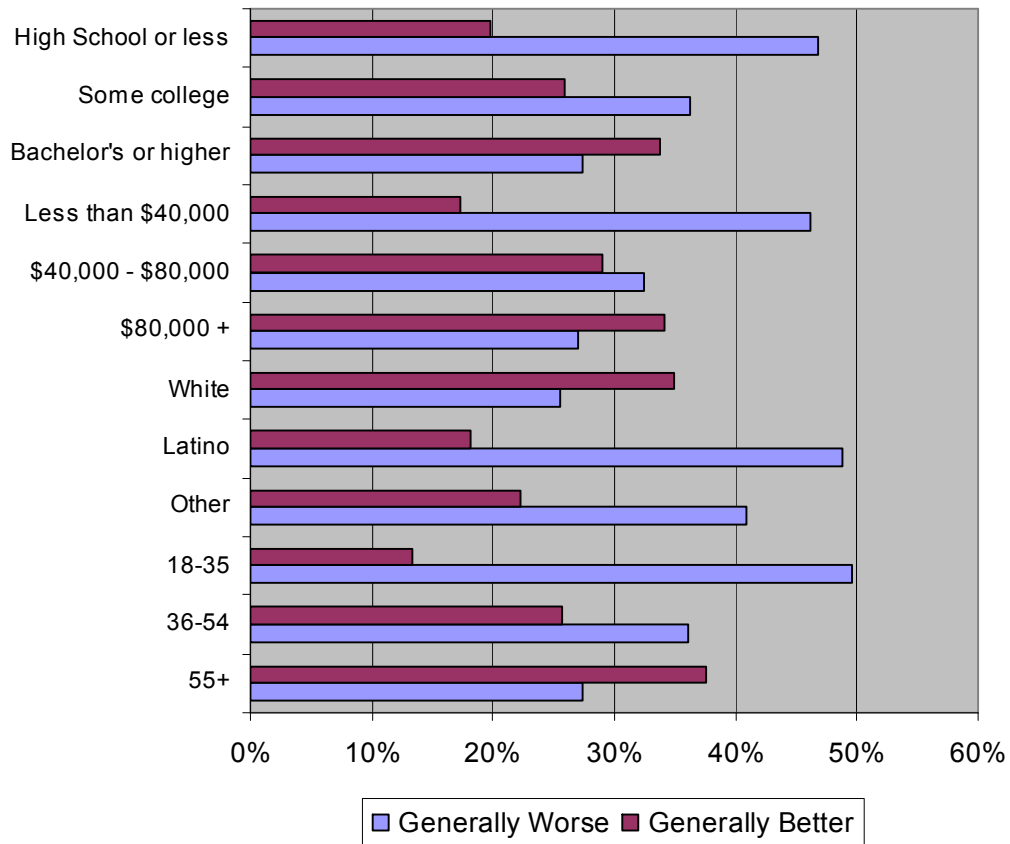


Figure 6: Compared to five years ago, do you think the air pollution situation in Southern California is...

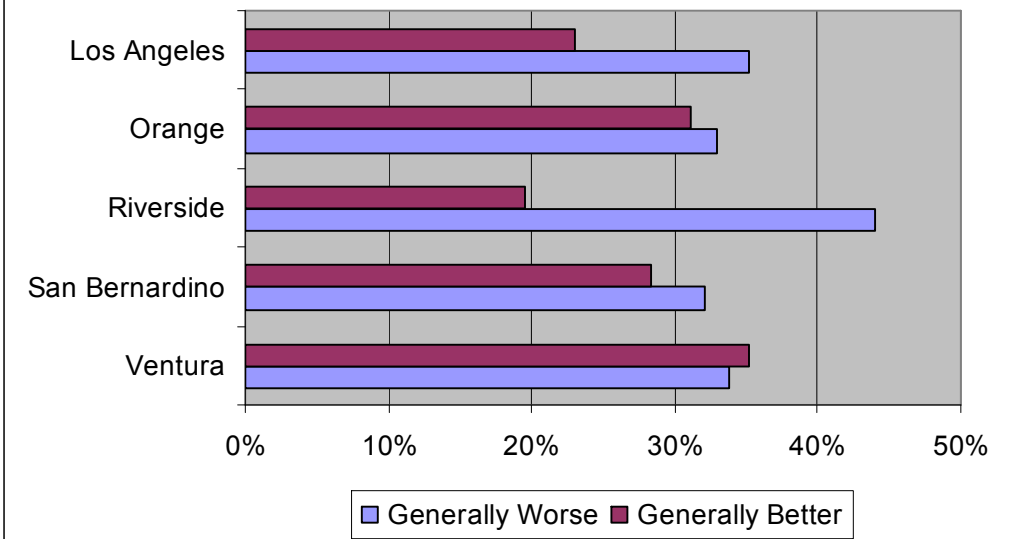


Figure 7: Pollution Compared to Five Years Ago

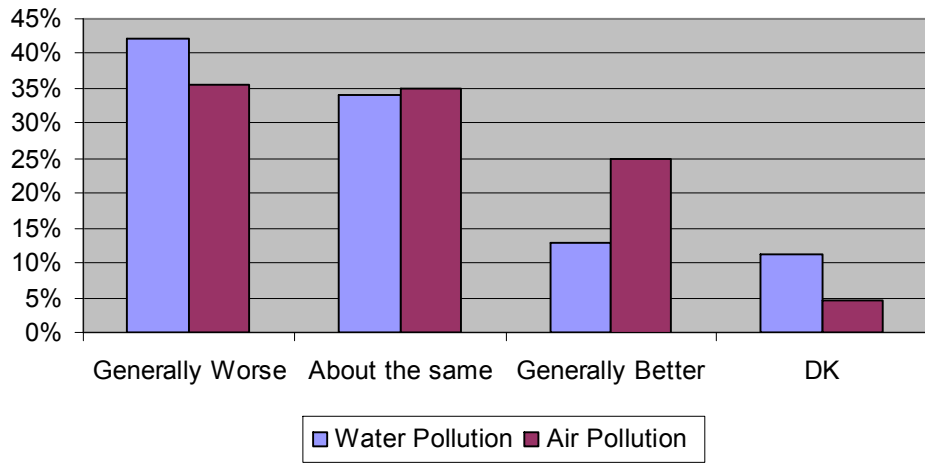


Figure 8: Which best describes the drinking water in your household?

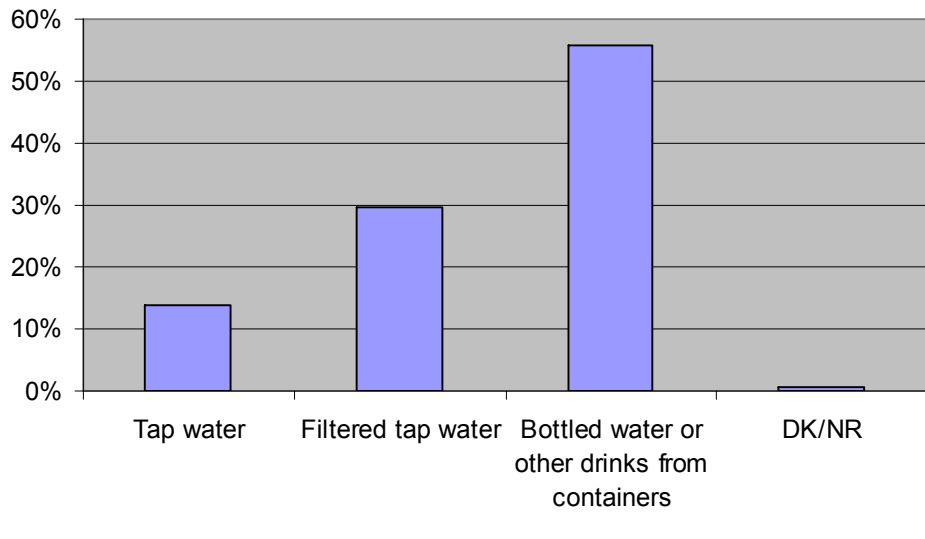


Figure 9: How serious do you think water pollution is at the beach?

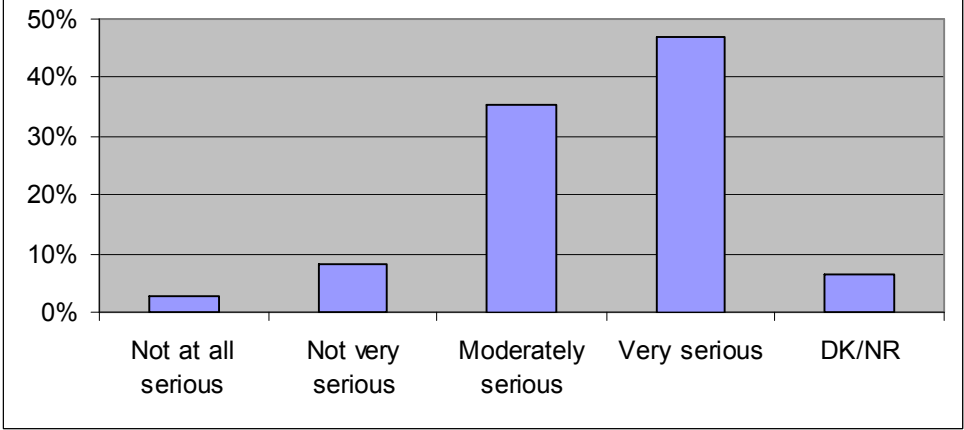


Figure 10: Willingness to pay to clean urban runoff by last time visited the beach

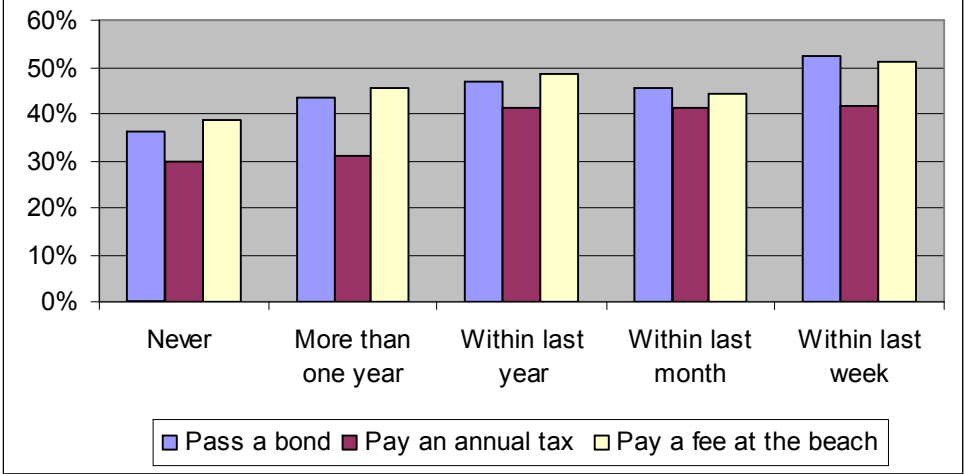


Figure 11: Which of the following do you think are appropriate uses for reclaimed water?

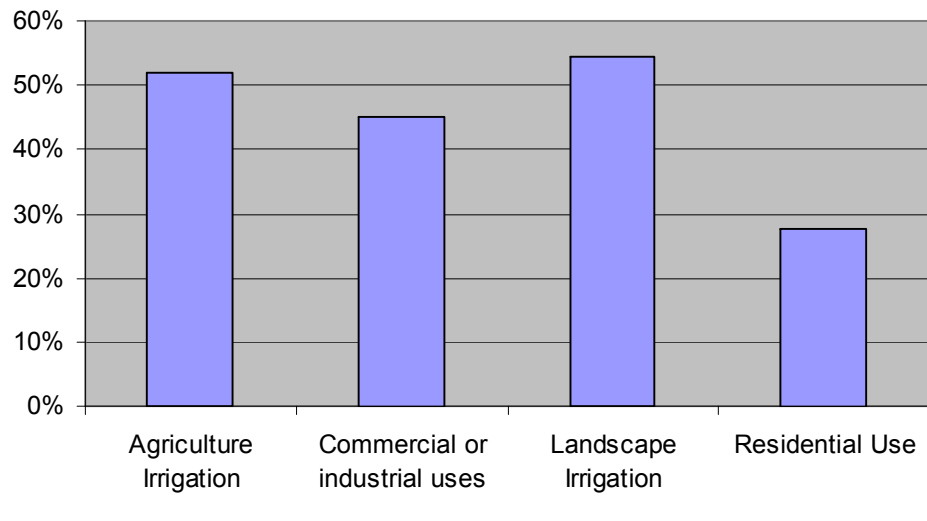


Figure 12: At the present time do you think that environmental protection regulations have:

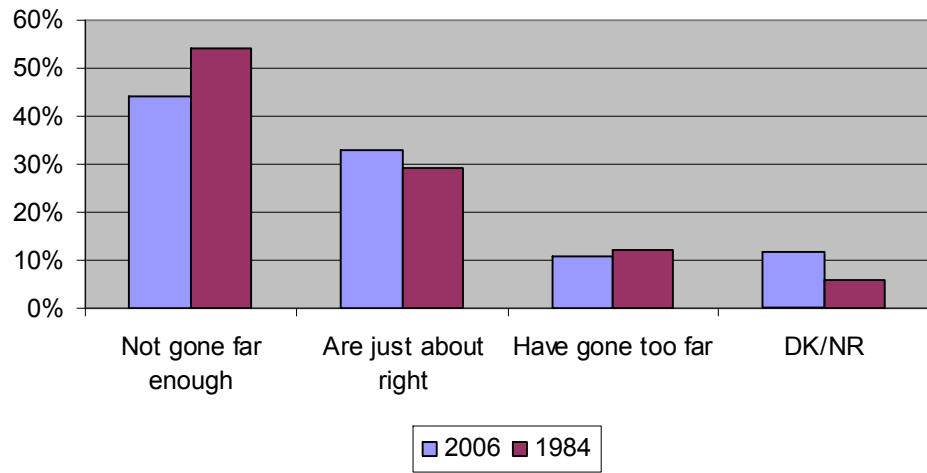


Figure 13: Feeling about local environmental regulations by concern over effects of pollution

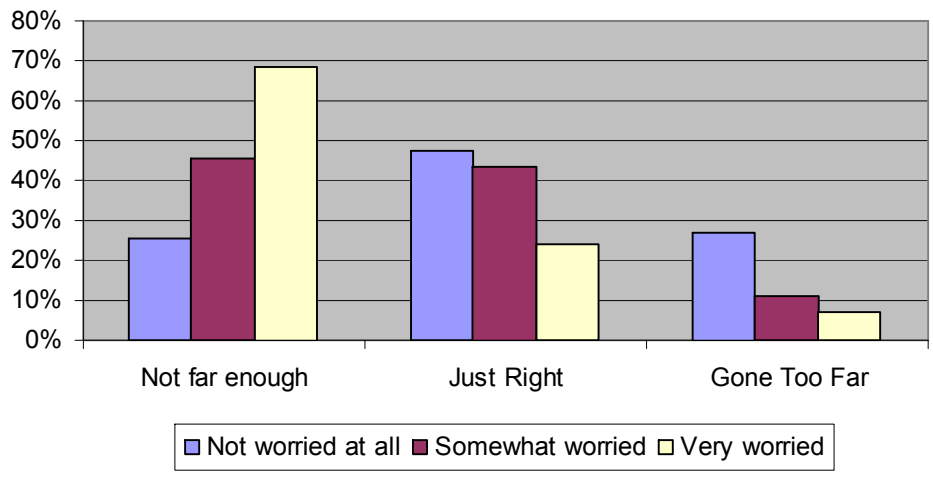


Figure 14: Opinion on elected officials' performance on the environment by opinion on local environmental regulations

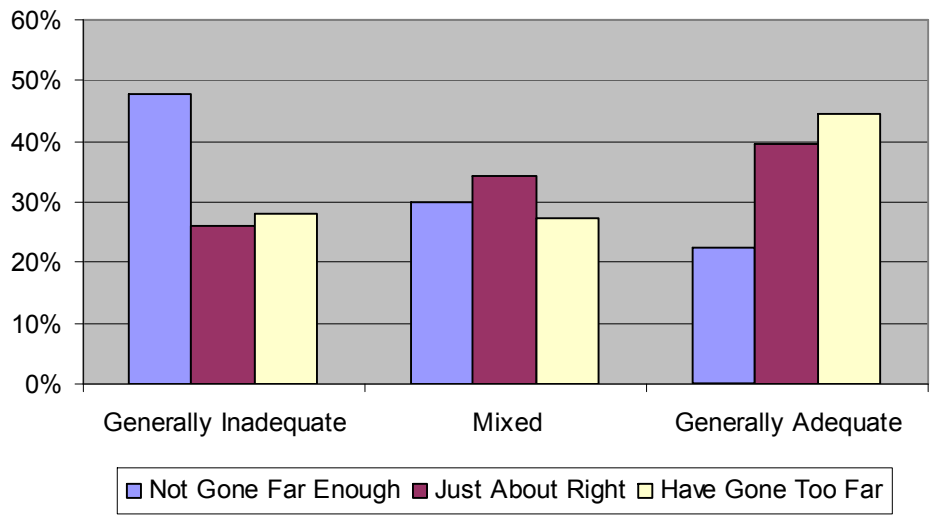
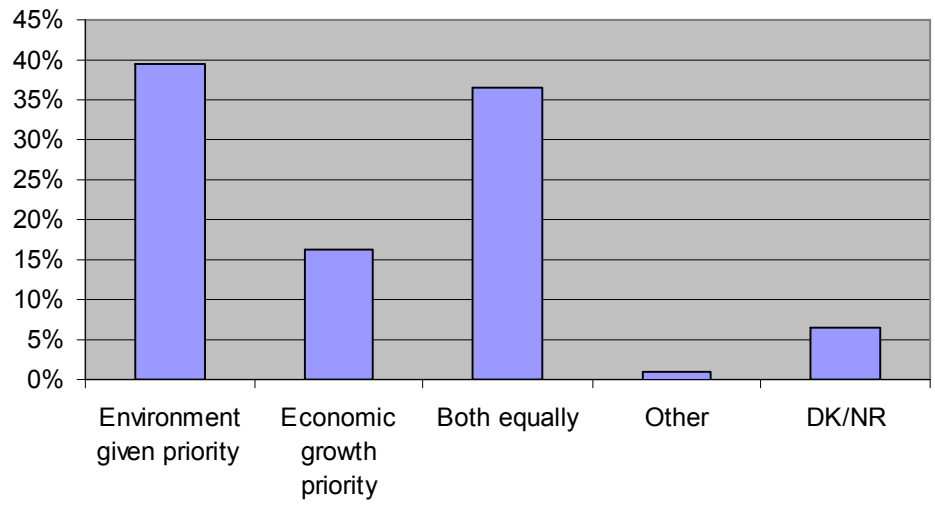


Figure 15: Which of these statements is closest to your views on Airport/Port expansion?



APPENDIX: Southern California Public Opinion Survey, 2006

The 2006 Southern California Public Opinion Survey is supported by the UCLA Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies and is designed to gather the views and opinions of Southern California residents on critical public policy issues in this region. The survey was developed with input from the campus and community organizations. UCLA partners include the UCLA Anderson School, as well as professors J.R. DeShazo and Arthur Winer. Public agencies include the Air Quality Management District (AQMD) and the Los Angeles Economic Development Corporation (LAEDC).

The 2006 Survey gathered basic demographic data and covered four topical areas: 1) major issues facing the region, 2) the efficacy of local government, 3) globalization and 4) the environment. When possible, questions were worded to parallel existing questions from other surveys.

The Survey was conducted in English and Spanish during the months of January, February, and March 2006 using random digit dialing, and the data were collected by The Social Science Research Center at California State University, Fullerton. There are 1502 completed surveys for the five counties: Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura. The sample is divided proportionally by county household population. The characteristics of the sample by age, ethnicity, income and home ownership categories are consistent with the 2004 March Current Population Survey and the 2004 American Community Survey. There is a sampling error of +/- 2.5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level for the full sample. (Sampling error may be larger for subpopulations).

1984 Southern California Social Survey:

The 1984 survey was conducted by UCLA's ISSR and had several similar characteristics to the 2006 Southern California Survey. Both surveys were household-based, and surveyed the same five-county Southern California region. The 1984 survey was a stratified random-digit dialed telephone sample of 1176 residents, based on area codes and telephone prefixes. Latinos were oversampled to ensure that the number would be large enough to analyze separately as a group.

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