

Soil Testing: Perceptions of Importance, Impact and Role of Cooperative Extension



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Introduction

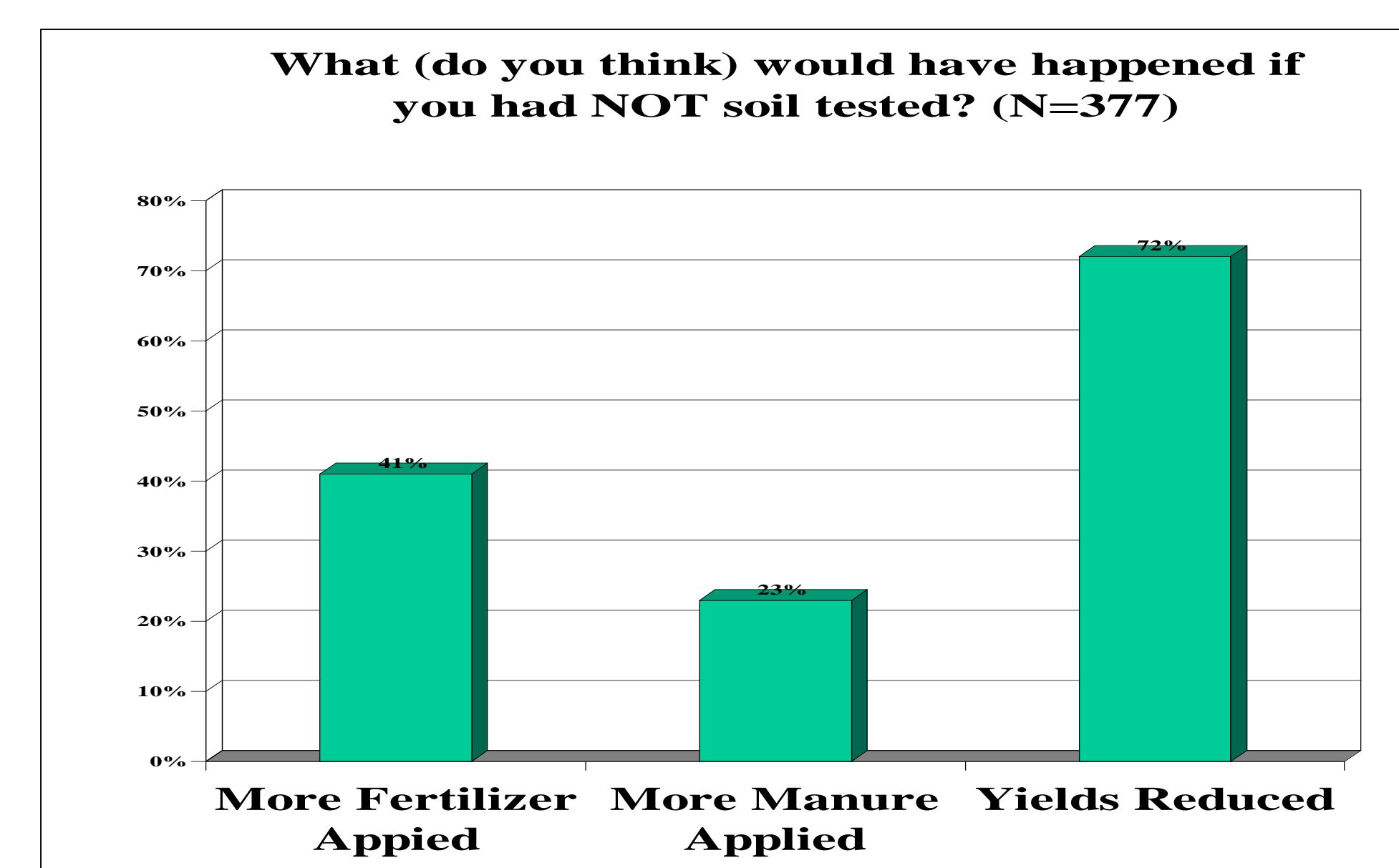
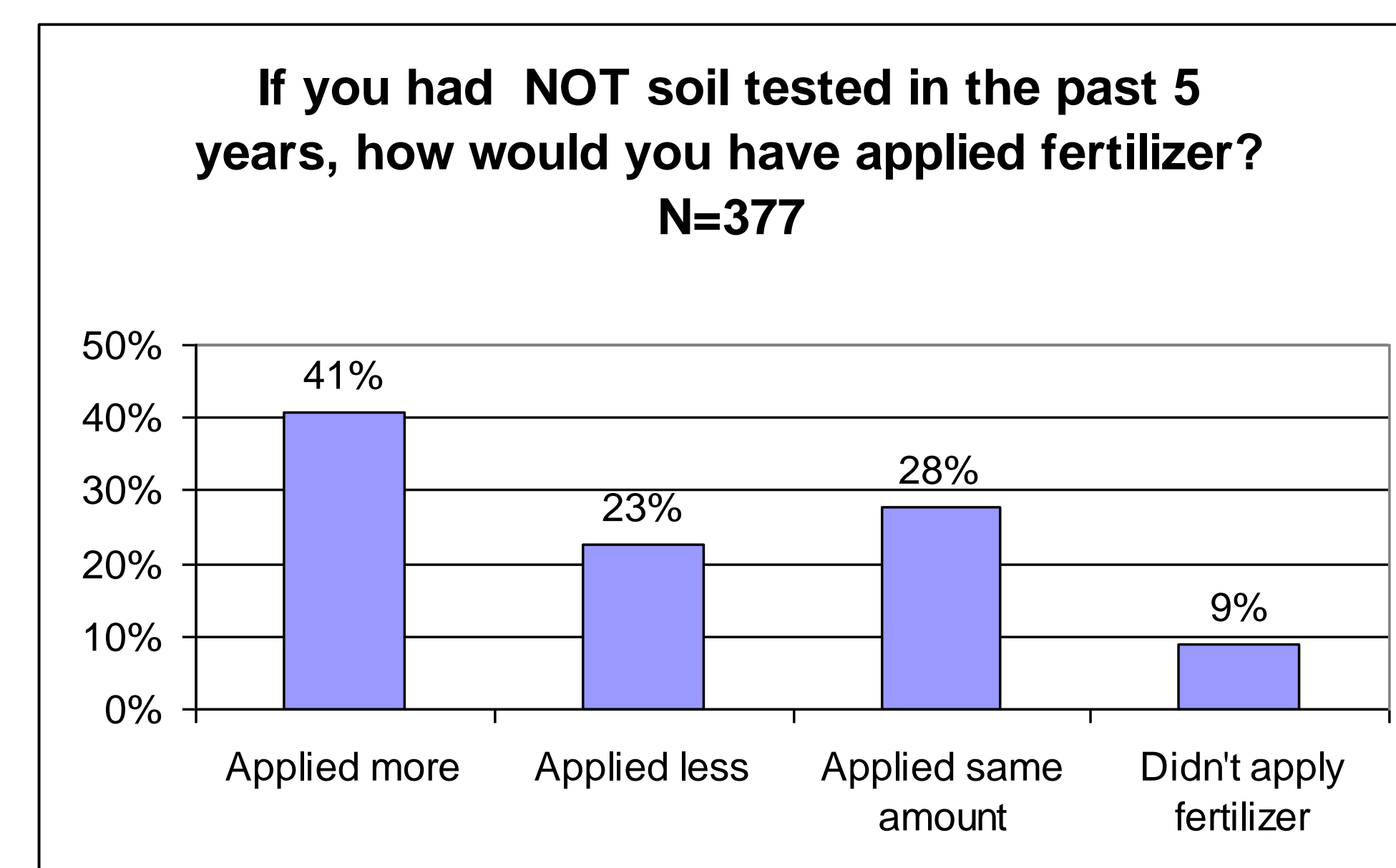
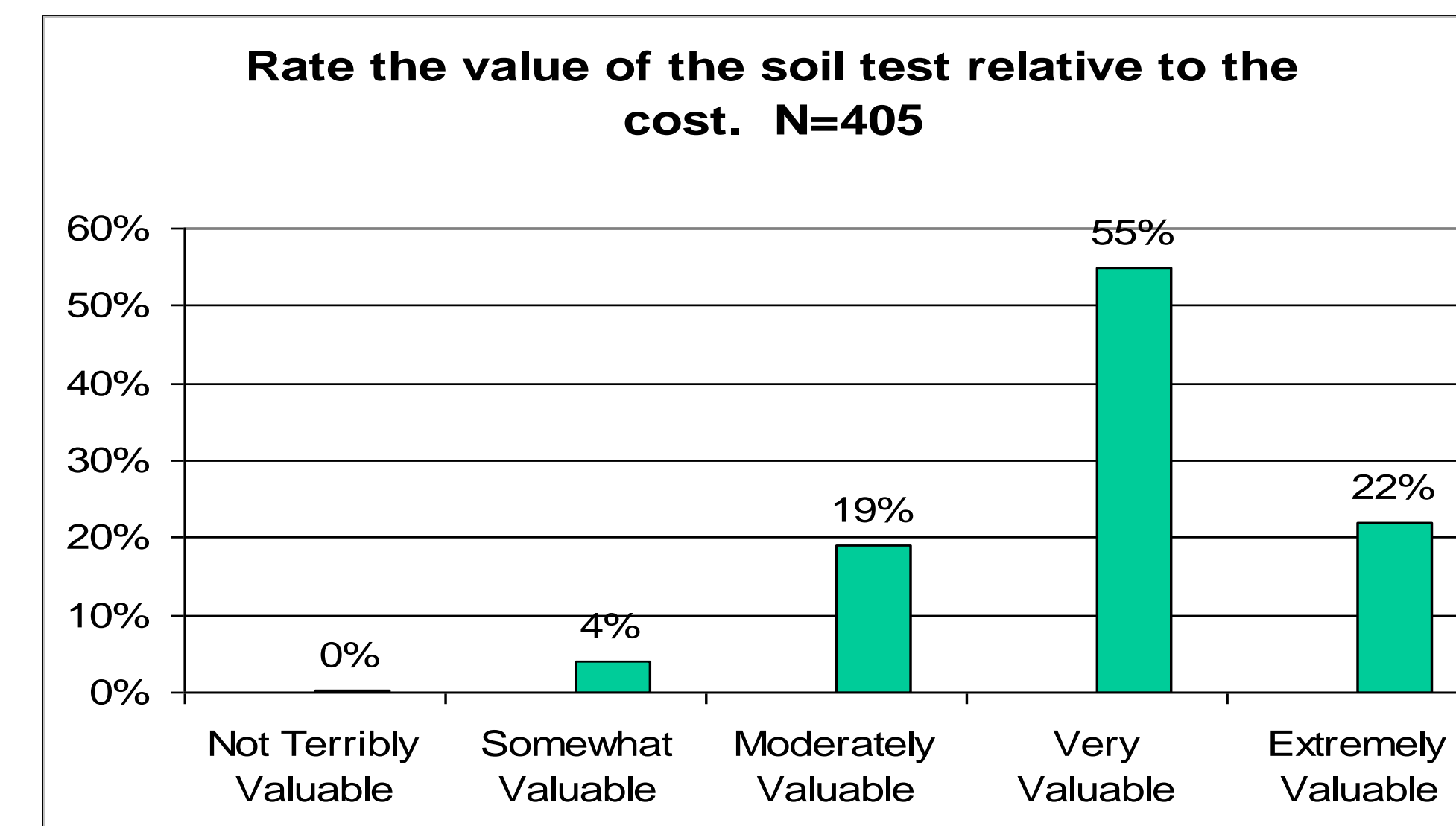
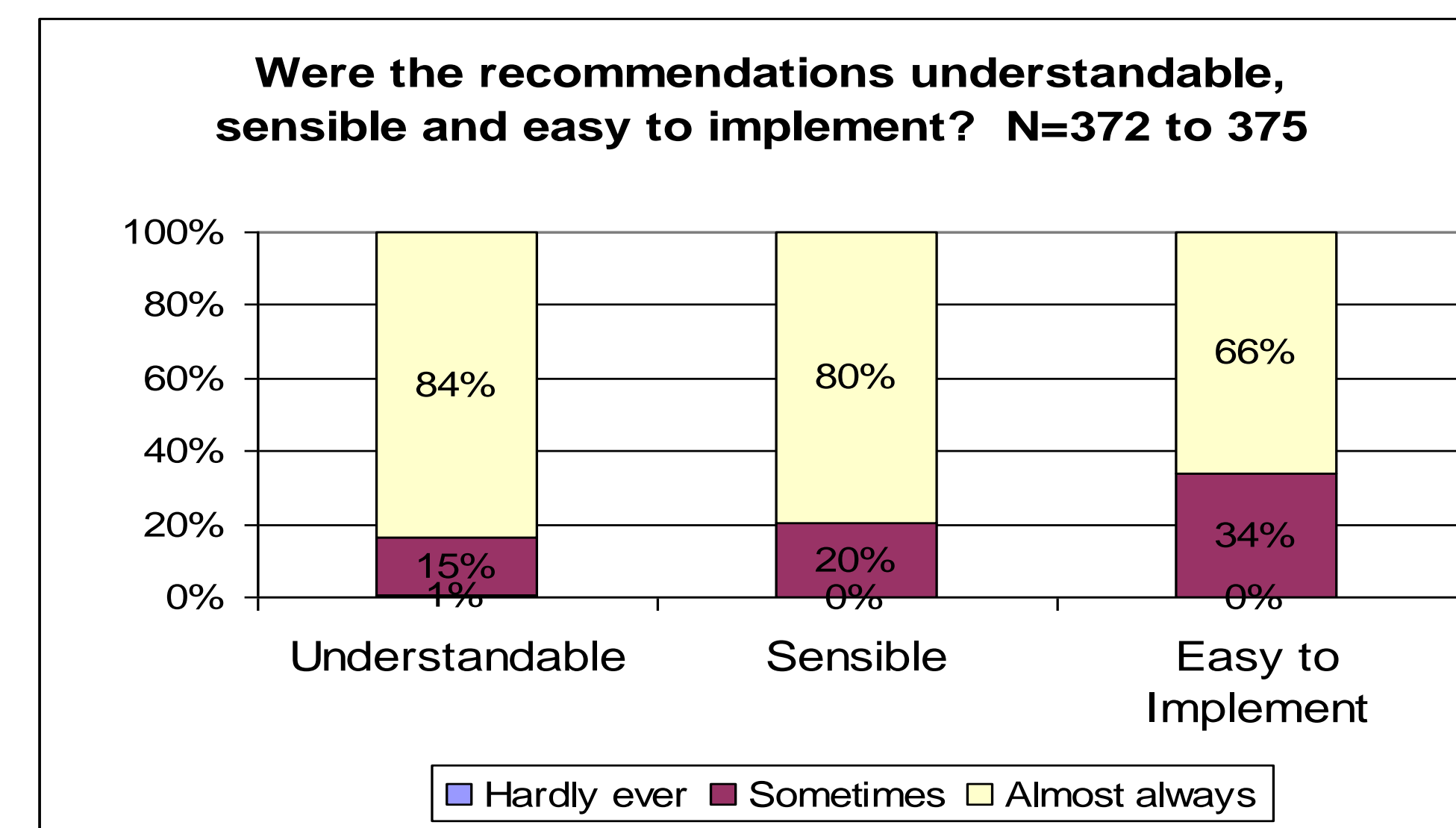
The objective of this study was to evaluate the perceived importance and role of Cooperative Extension in soil testing in Pennsylvania, and to look at the reported impact of extension recommendations on producer practices.

Methods

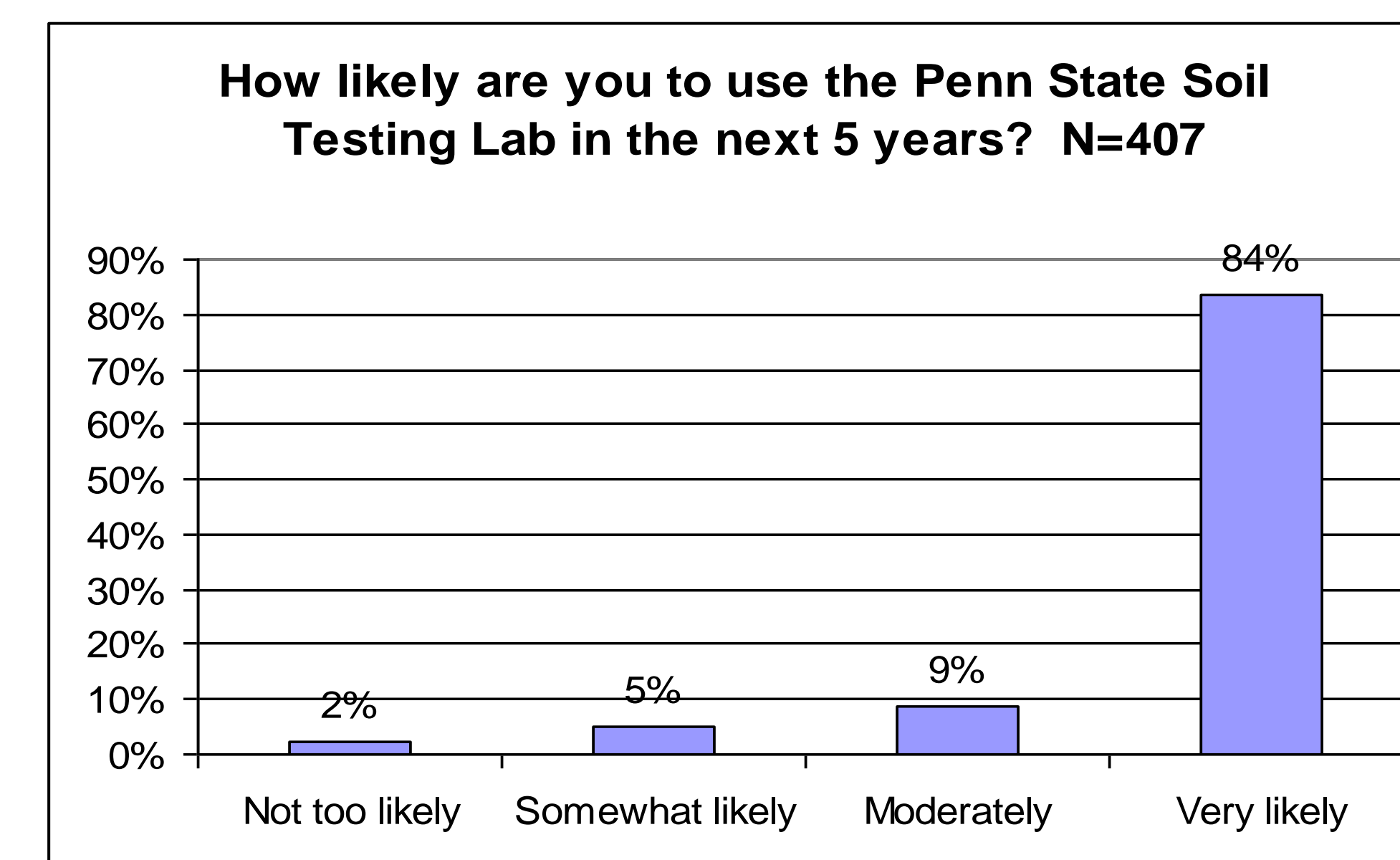
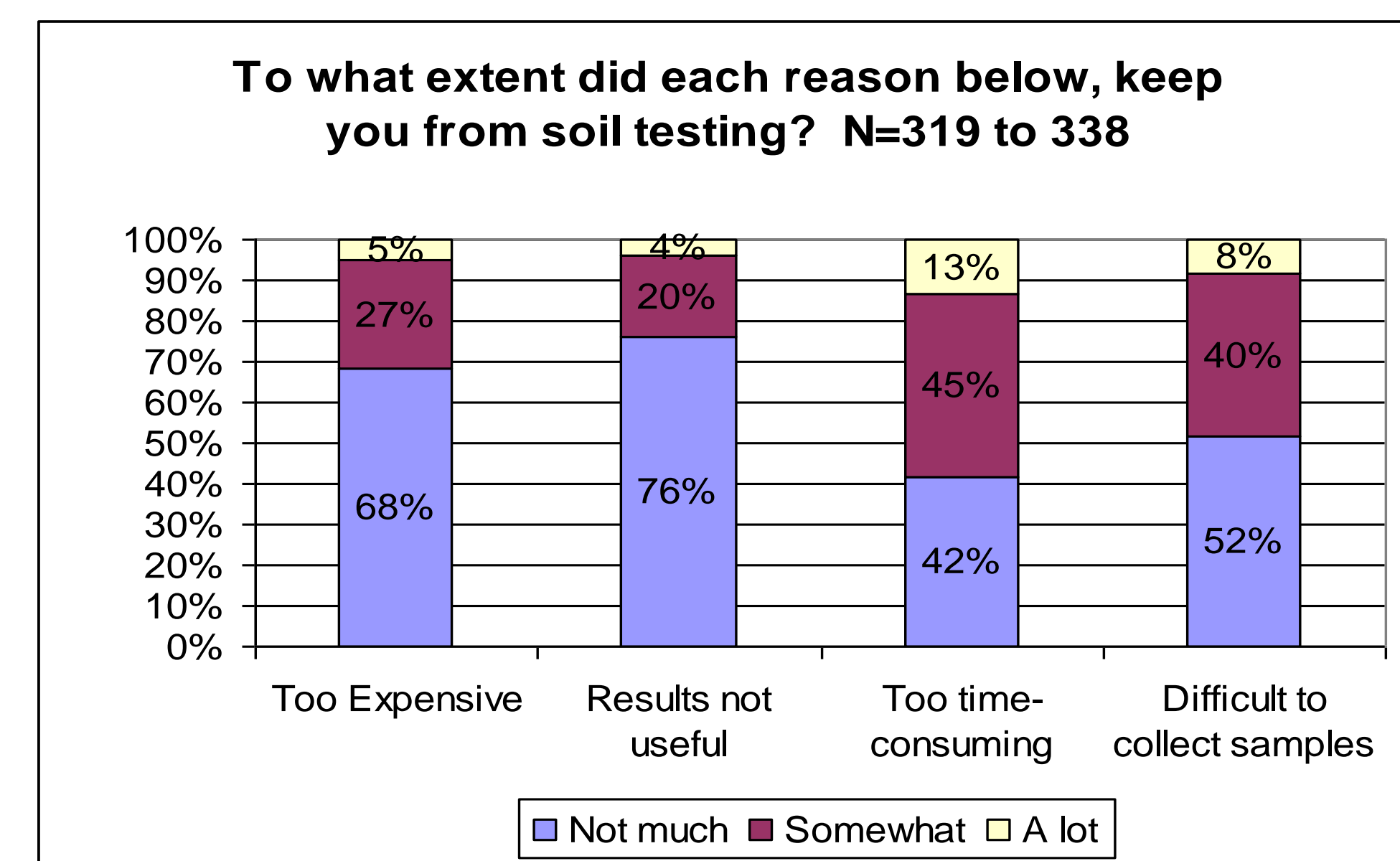
A random subset of 550 laboratory users was selected from the total listing of those who had used the laboratory for soil analyses in the past 3 years. A survey with cover letter was sent to the sample of users, followed by a reminder postcard. For those not responding within 2 weeks, a second letter and survey were mailed, followed by another reminder postcard. The return rate was approximately 75%. The survey was comprised of 23 questions in areas focused on 1) testing process and quality of services, 2) use and importance of soil testing in Pennsylvania and 3) the role of extension in soil testing. The strength of the Pennsylvania Analytical laboratory appears to be due in part to its strong connection with the Extension Soils program and local extension offices.

Use - Value and Impact of Soil Tests

We asked questions to determine if the soil test results were valued, and what impact on producer practices resulted from our Cooperative Extension soils program that is so integrally tied to the lab recommendations. Some of the questions asked included:

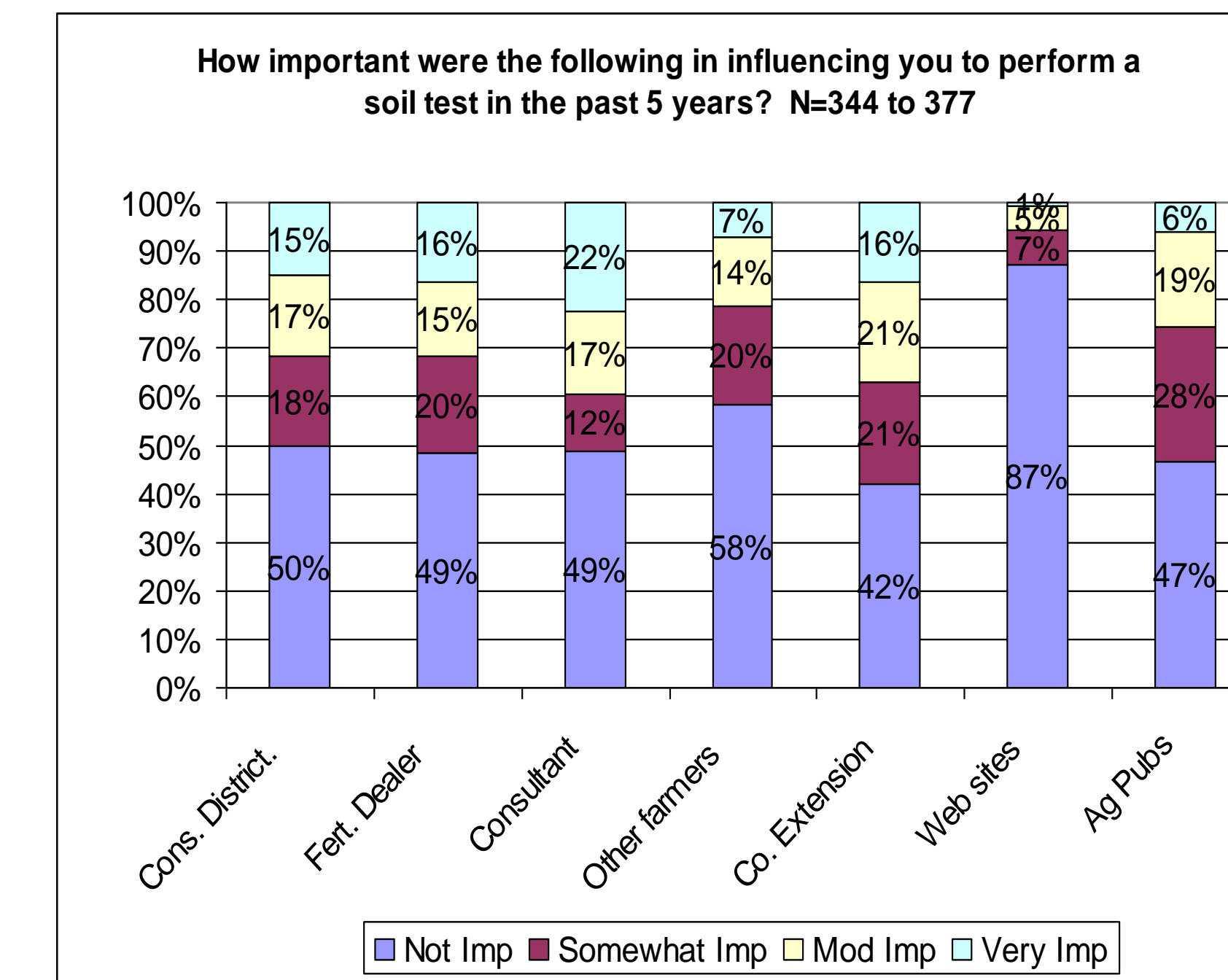


Barriers to soil testing and likelihood for future testing

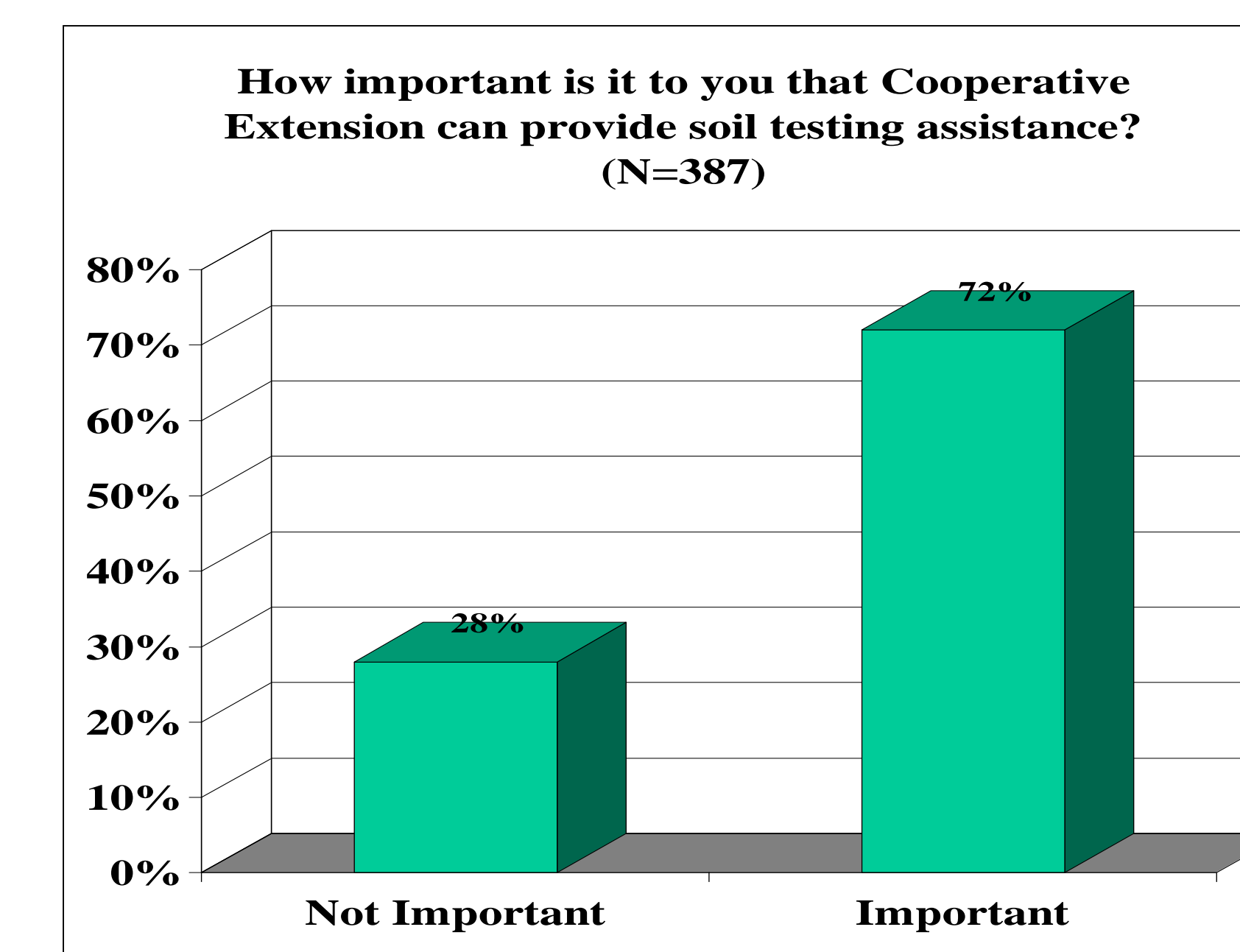


The biggest barrier to soil testing was considered to be the time required. In spite of that, most respondents said they were likely to use the lab again within the next 5 years.

Role and importance of Cooperative Extension



Local extension staff were the most frequently identified individuals in influencing people to perform a soil test, followed closely by fertilizer dealers, consultants, conservation district personnel, and agricultural publications. WEBSITES were not considered important.



72% of respondents considered it important that local extension educators be able to assist with soil testing.

Summary

The survey indicated about 55% of the respondents reported receiving their kits from an extension office (data not shown). Traditionally, soil testing has been a key to extension programs in Pennsylvania, as well as in many other parts of the US. Cooperative Extension impacts laboratory use, and lab use supports extension programs to create impact. A couple results demonstrating this include: the perceived reduction in nutrients applied as a result of using extension recommendations contained in soils reports, the likelihood of future testing, and the importance of having local extension educators available to help with soil test interpretations. The close connection between the laboratory and extension programs seem to help keep both strong.

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