



## What are the barriers keeping farmers out of carbon markets?

Featuring Lee Briese

Independent Crop Consultant and CCA

### DJ May:

Welcome to the Decode 6 podcast, where we take your questions about carbon and ecosystem services and match them to the experts with the answers. I'm your host, DJ May. And today we're asking one big question, what are the barriers keeping farmers from enrolling in carbon markets? And I'm very excited to introduce our expert, Lee Briese. He's a great person to answer this question. He's an independent crop consultant and CCA from Central North Dakota. He provides agronomic advice that helps farmers build customized systems to grow and manage crops profitably. He specializes in helping farmers adopt practices to protect and improve their soil and local environment, including reduced till, no-till, cover crops, crop rotation, and increased plant and economic diversity. So Lee, it's a pleasure to have you here.

### Lee Briese:

Yeah, thanks. I'm looking forward to it.

### DJ May:

Great. Well, we're going to dive right in. So what are the barriers keeping farmers out of carbon markets right now?

### Lee Briese:

Well, so I wanted to talk about this whole thing of what farmers are because it seems like people think that farmers are something different or something foreign or a different concept. Farmers are just people like anybody else. So the same hangups that anybody would have are the things that farmers would have. One of the differences though I want people to remember is that these farmers are also business owners. So at the same time, they're not just a regular person making a purchase. They're making a decision based on their business, and it's often family business. So all of your coworkers are related to you, and just think about that for a second. So you never really have this separation of work and family. So if there's an argument in the business, it continues into your personal life, you never really get away from it. So that is one of the things I think is different for a lot of people, is this idea that the business and the family really aren't separate. So I think that's one thing to keep in mind when you're thinking about farmers.

### DJ May:

Yeah. Yeah. Well, I can think right now the conversation's really different when you're talking with your family. I mean, you're thinking about long-term. Where do you want to end up? What are you doing here? There's relationship management. Some people are going to be more risk averse than others, I can tell you. I guess, how does that look when you're chatting about these markets in particular?

**Lee Briese:**

Yeah, for sure. So that is one of those challenges is that there's a dynamic within the business and the family that is that subtle secondary communication that you're not going to pick up with. I've been with my farmers for many, many years and I consider myself a pretty good friend with most of them. But there's still internal conversations and things that have happened that you don't necessarily pick up. So the thing is understanding where they're at, know where they're at on the risk spectrum, know where they're at in their production system. Those types of things are really powerful. Know where they're at as far as making commitments. That really is a big part of this is... I think several people understand, well, they're doing it anyway. They're doing these practices anyway. It's a little tweaked to the system. It shouldn't be that difficult to do.

And I think we were talking earlier about purchases and when you're looking at purchases and the difference between a large purchase and maybe a small purchase, that's a long-term purchase. And it's really interesting. So the idea of talking about buying a refrigerator, not a super expensive piece of equipment, but they tend to last forever or you hope they do. So even though it's not a really expensive thing to get into, it's not different. You're going to need one. But when you're looking at a new refrigerator, what features do I want? Am I going to like the ice machine? Do I want it to have water? Do I want it to have the freezer on the bottom or the freezer on the top or all of these little things? How is it going to fit into our kitchen and our daily life?

And so a couple thousand dollars, that's really not a big purchase, but I think people spend a lot of time on that because it's a long commitment. I think that's really what... That's a good analogy here for these carbon markets. Granted that a lot of the farming practices we're going to use are similar or are the same. You tweak them a little bit, but they do look different, especially over long-term commitments, over long timeframes. I think that's really something that I think is a hangup is because we're talking about multi-generational businesses, and again, it's your family. So there's this lasting thing. So even if you've retired from your business, you're not out of the business per se. You're still part of the family, so you're still connected to that. So if you've made a decision that you even slightly regret, it carries on. And I think that's one of the things that really is holding people back from this, is some of the long-term commitments that the carbon markets are requiring.

**DJ May:**

Yeah. Well, just to double back to the fridge analogy, because I was thinking about this the other day too. We just recently bought a fridge and we went from the type that has the two doors that open in the middle to one door that opens and it's wide. And I was just like, oh my gosh, every time I go to open this fridge, I'm reaching for the wrong spot. I'm kind of thinking about how it changes your whole workflow. And I was like, that's so funny, because even if it's a small change, you don't realize there's kind of a hurdle to get over until you've adapted to that. So I feel like that kind of fits as well.

**Lee Briese:**

Yeah, for sure. Absolutely fits. It is the small changes that do change your workflow, change the timing of what you're doing, change small things, where you placing items to work in the kitchen,

right? Well, that's the same thing is true in the farm. If you're changing your tillage management or you're changing, you're adding cover crops, it seems like a small thing. You have all the same pieces, but it's a different timing. It's a different technique, and it's just a little bit different. And that change can be disruptive in some systems, and some people are ready for it and some people aren't. And again, this is that family discussion. So I think the fridge is a better analogy than the general business analogy would be, but I think scientists experience the same thing. A lot of times scientists don't realize that their core research is really a business.

It's run a business. They have to acquire finances, funding, all of that type of stuff. They have to make sure they have the right personnel, the right people with the right skills at the right time, and then plan out the timeline. It's very much a business type of thing. I don't think that they see it that way, but it's very analogous to farming. So this is really what I want to do because I go a lot of places, I talk to several people, I talk to both the science communities and the farming communities, and they just feel like, oh, those aren't scientists, all these crazy farmers, why won't they do they're separate entities, they're different species?

No, we're all people, we're all the same. We think about things in the same ways. We look through different lenses, and I think that's really the point I'm getting at here is the business lens of a farmer also has the family lens attached to it. And this is even true with scientists. A lot of those students become family over time. So it's very similar that if you think about it in that way, and you're making long-term decisions for someone who is going to take over your role in the future, it does change how you view that risk.

**DJ May:**

Yeah, yeah. No, I totally agree. And I know for the academics I've talked to too, those research programs are similar to a farm and that you hope it's still there and operational in 30, 50, 100 years, you're trying to set it up for success.

**Lee Briese:**

Absolutely. And they don't fully retire either. Many of them don't. They're still there. They're still the knowledge base and the information base. They don't walk away. It's a life's work. They're very similar. It's a life's work. It's not, oh, this was my job for 10 years and I liked it, but now I'm doing something else, which I don't have a problem with either. That's fine. But it's a different mindset.

**DJ May:**

Yeah. Well, you did such a nice job just now laying out the people who have stakes in this. You have the farmers, you have the researchers, and then we have these market developers kind of coming in to both of these areas and selling a solution essentially. But how do you get on the same page when you talk about making changes or finding common ground when it comes to markets?

**Lee Briese:**

Well, I'm going to refer back to this buying a refrigerator thing again, and really who are you taking? So you go to the store and you talk to the salesperson, but you've done your research,

you've already been online. This is not like it was 30 years ago. You already have a pretty good idea of what you want and what the prices should be and what the features are. But you want to see it, touch it, feel it, that whole thing, get a feel for it. What does it really look like? This is the same thing here. We want to get an idea of what does it really look like? But they've done a lot of research on the backend. So one of the big things is I think if you have a rapport with that person, who is the intermediary, the person who can finish your purchase for you, because you can't just buy a fridge without someone intermediary, whether it's online or whatever, you still have to work through someone.

Same thing with these carbon markets. We have to work through a market advisor or a market provider to get there. So I think a pre part of that is having a good rapport and a trusting relationship. Now, this doesn't have to be family level, trusting relationship. It doesn't have to be that high, but there needs to be some trust there because again, you're making a long-term commitment, a long-term decision, and if you think the person is not being forthright with you, you're probably not going to make that decision. And you may buy the exact same model from someone who did build rapport from you. I think this is really the key is that to give time, I think this is just a human problem, give time to build trust and be honest and be forthright and it goes forward. Otherwise, people are buying strictly on price or convenience.

I mean, when we look at online shopping, there's no rapport there with these companies. It's strictly price. And you can pull up four different websites and completely price shop. Then the only thing it comes down to who's going to ship it to me and how it's going to do it, what are the costs? And there's no real loyalty there. I don't see the same kind of customer loyalty. And again, there's not that same kind of trust. So if you're going to purchase something on Amazon, myself personally, I'm reading the reviews, even if it's not a big purchase, I'm reading the reviews. Like yeah, okay, you can put all the fluffy stuff underneath the description, but what did people think of it? So I think that's really a big part of it is you have to build this kind of trust.

**DJ May:**

Yeah, yeah. And this is a long-term commitment in a lot of these programs, it's usually 10 years. So I think about that when I make a purchase too. It's like, are they going to be responsive if I have an issue come up? What happens if something goes sideways?

**Lee Briese:**

How do you predict 10 years from now?

**DJ May:**

Will they still be there?

**Lee Briese:**

Yeah. How do you predict 10 years? So there is some reputation based on the company or the business, long-term businesses that you've done... Companies you've done business with for many years, there's some type of backing there, but it still comes down to the people that work there. I mean, it really does. If those people have been there and you've worked with them before, you're

much more likely to do it again. The same thing whether it's a scientist in a position or a farmer on the farm or the salesperson or the carbon market person. If there's some continuity there, and especially continuity of message, I think that's really important. I think this is one of the struggles right now. Our carbon markets are changing. How they're evaluating them is changing, how we're soil testing and verifying, and there's a lot of opportunities.

There's a lot of different things, and they're seeing people are trying things out and they're finding, wow, this way works better than that one. So there's a change in a feature. All right, well that kind of resets your buying decision now. So this, I wouldn't call it turmoil, but this rapid change in the industry is pushing some of the low risk people to wait just because until it settles down, I'm not going to make a 20-year investment until it settles down. People are like, "Well, it's not that big of investment." No, but are you just going to buy a fridge? If the other one's still kind of working, you're not going to.

I mean, if your food is spoiling, okay, you're going to buy a fridge. That's not where we're at. Yeah, we're not at this [inaudible 00:12:07] it's still working. They're doing their thing, they're looking at it, the whole thing. It's still working and they want to get in the carbon market. Of course, you want to get in the carbon market. It makes sense and you want to find that solution, but it has to be something that makes sense 5 years, 10 years, maybe even 20 years down the line.

**DJ May:**

Yeah. I guess just to round this whole conversation out, what are some practical tips you might give for getting people moving in the same direction? How do we just get on the same page here, keep working toward our common goals?

**Lee Briese:**

I think it's important for everybody to be invested in the conversation. I think it's important to have many little conversations. And I've been talking about this with several people rather than projecting to millions, I think we need to have millions of small conversations. Rather than big, large, giant marketing campaigns to millions and I think that has its purpose, but it's not really trust building. That's advertisement. That's awareness building. Trust building comes down to just that, building trust with that person, with that company, with that entity. Having, again, several touches. You don't build trust with somebody the first time you've met them, but after you've worked with them or you've met with them or you've done projects with them over time, again, it doesn't have to be family level trust. We're talking about acquaintance level trust. Somebody who returns your calls, returns your emails, gets back to you.

Is there when you ask something, is there when you need something. Those little pieces of trust all along the way. So I think it's millions of small conversations that are going to get us to where we need to be rather than one big conversation trying to reach millions of people. And so I think that really is the crux of this, that it requires the investment of all the players. So the scientists are doing the research. I want you to be doing small conversations often because it's again, those repetitive touches. And the same thing with the farmers, should look at it several times in different lenses again and again and again. And as far as the carbon market providers, I think it's the same thing. Be there, be available, be visible. Don't be excessively in your face. So we all get

the emails, 200 emails a day that are just like, "Oh, today is something special holiday in Holland. We're giving you 10% off."

Okay, cool. But the thing is that's not helping me make a purchase decision. That's not a touch, that's not personal, that's not investment. If we're really going to invest in climate change, I think we need to be talking about it together and we need to be building trust across all these bridges, then it becomes a lot easier, especially when the farmer can say, well, the scientist really believes in this. They really know that this does what they're saying it does. And that comes with time. All right, well then it's easier. That feature has been validated. Somebody's got maybe not a guarantee, but some strong opinions that it works.

**DJ May:**

That's a great point too. I mean, having a million small conversations and coming back to what you were saying about timeframes, having many small conversations gives you time to think about it and process it before you make a commitment too.

**Lee Briese:**

Right. And I'm not talking about, well, this is going to take 50 years, so people can see this like, oh, how I don't like to communicate. My job is not to sell this. Again, the scientists and farmers are very similar in this. Their main jobs are not necessarily people communications. Their main jobs are farming production and science production. Those are two different things. But I think those things of just being human, who you are, why are you doing this? Why do you believe in it? Why is it important to you? And I think we all want the same things. We want a healthy climate. We want predictable weather. We want good sustainable food sources. We don't want to worry about our weather events and our children's futures. We're in this together. And I think that's really that thing that you build over time. So then it takes a skepticism out of it when the scientist is personal and says, I really want to make a better place in the world, and here's what my research says can help do that.

And the farmer can listen to that and say, well, I want the same thing. And it's not that much. It may not be that difficult for me to change or adjust my workflow a little bit. I'll be frustrated for a while until I get it figured out, but I can do this. And then I think that's part of the continuing conversation is no, DJ, it's worth it for the big door. Here's the advantage. I know this sucks because you changed it, but here's the advantage to it, the whole thing. And so the continuous thing, yeah, you're doing the right thing. You made a good decision. It's fine because these are permanent decisions. They really are. So from what we can tell, once you sold your carbon, you've sold your carbon, it's done. And it's a long-term commitment. So I think that's... Framing it that way, I think educates the discussion.

And I think encouraging people to have small discussions, lunch discussions, after the presentation discussions, having that presentation and really having it open for questions. But you only get to two or three people in a hundred room audience that are always going to ask the question, spend some time, be there afterwards. Let the other people who are going to come up to you 1-on-1 or in small groups or two or three come and talk to you and spend some time in that

thing. I think that really is a big part of it, whether that's the market provider or the scientists providing the information, allow time for that rapport to build.

**DJ May:**

Definitely. Any final thoughts, Lee?

**Lee Briese:**

Yeah. There's no one solution, right? There's no one big, just do this and it'll work. I think it is just about building trust and building rapport. And that does take time. But if we have millions of people doing it, it will move faster. And I think this is the frustration. We want this to be moving like, why isn't this picking up? Why aren't we seeing more impact? Why aren't we seeing more producers doing X, Y, Z? Why aren't we seeing more consumers doing X, Y, Z? And a big part of it simply is that we haven't built up that rapport and the trust that in the process, because you're not going to see the immediate results of recycling or carbon reduction. They're not immediate. They're not today I saved time on my workflow, they're cumulative and all these little pieces that we each do become something larger.

And that's where I think the real value of it is. So I think, to me, that is the big thing is to have patients with each other. But the more conversations we have, the sooner we have them, the faster we'll see movement rather than millions and millions of dollars spent on billboards and Super Bowl commercials and all that kind of fun stuff.

**DJ May:**

Yeah. And I think about the value of that feedback too, for both sides. It's like researchers can learn a ton from conversations over time. You can figure out what's working, what's not, and then vice versa. I think farmers could benefit a lot from hearing what's going on in research instead of waiting until the meta-analysis comes out.

**Lee Briese:**

Right. Well, I see this in my conversations. Again, I speak with both, I hate to call them sides, but both groups of people. And really the thing is the research is like, why don't farmers want to do this? And farmers are like, why did they use that? We never use that. Does it relate? How does it relate? And it probably does, but there has to be a transitional thing. It's even certain fertilizers, they just make more sense in research than they do in practical act. So they'll use a certain product and they're like, well, we never use that. Why would they use that? And it's just because of the scale or whatever. There's other reasons. And you're like, oh, well this is why they use it. Oh, okay. And it still mattered. It still matters. I think that's just that thing is... And the research is how come they don't want to do this?

Well, here's why this is complicated in the logistics. And they just didn't know. So those little conversations can be helpful. They can be challenging. There's no doubt about that. And I'm one who also... The other piece of advice I would say, if somebody's not willing to listen, don't yell at them. It's fine. It's okay. Not everybody's going to jump onto this bus. Not everybody is excited about it. But a lot of people are curious. Find the curious people, find the ones that are interested.

If they've already made up their mind one way or the other, you're nearly not going to convince someone.

If they just have a strong opinion about GE refrigerators, that's probably where they're going to go. Right? So this is just like trying to convince them into something else is just probably not good time management for either of you. So really, I think having those conversations with the people who are curious, who are interested, who come to you, but being available, whether it's a farmer being available or the researcher being available, or the carbon markets being available for those conversations, be there, be available, be willing to have the small conversations and then allow that person to think about those things and then come back and have another small conversation a week, two weeks, a month, whatever it is that that allows you to process.

I don't know many people that go on the internet, spend 10 minutes and then click button on buy refrigerator. You've probably spent a couple of weeks looking at it. I would guess you did and probably went to the stores and checked them out. Maybe you didn't buy it from the store, but you wanted to see it. So it's a process. So the more people we get started on the process, the better. But you're not started unless you need to. So if you don't think you need a new fridge, you're probably not looking. So that's the thing. So having these little conversations, I really think, to me, is one of the solutions.

**DJ May:**

Perfect. Well, thank you so much, Lee. I really appreciate your perspective and your time.

**Lee Briese:**

It was fun.

**DJ May:**

If you have questions you'd like us to answer about carbon and ecosystem services, send us a note. You can reach us anytime at [info@decode6.org](mailto:info@decode6.org). And if you're curious about carbon and ecosystem services and you want to learn more, come visit us at [decode6.org](http://decode6.org).