

## Paying Farmers in a Coin They Can Recognize

“Scientific reports tell us that agriculture does play a significant role in greenhouse gas emissions and that its role can shift from problem creation to problem solving.”

— News Item

**O**n my 13,000-acre, fourth-generation family farm in Rock Hall, Maryland, I’ve worked to create a balance between my roots in traditional agriculture and my personal interest in finding a more environmentally sustainable way to farm. My belief in the importance of getting closer to the natural ecosystem of the land is realized in my fields, which aren’t tilled and have living plants all year long. When neighboring farms are full of freshly turned rows of brown earth in spring, my fields are still green with rye, barley, clover, radishes, and other cover crops.

Farming the way that I do requires a radical departure from generational knowledge — leaving behind methods and skills that have been passed down from farmer to farmer over lifetimes. On a practical level, implementing techniques like cover cropping also adds to a farmer’s workload, extending the season long past the fall harvest into winter and even spring. And although programs run by environmental organizations and government agencies can offset the cost of implementing cover crops, if becoming more environmentally responsible and climate-sensitive means more work, at the same total pay, and requires a radical shift in thinking, how do we get farmers to do it?

The solution needs to look beyond altruism into other forms of payment. We might not be able to convince farmers to heal the world one field at a time just to sleep better at night. But I think by looking past ideology we can provide a more pragmatic way forward. The



**Trey Hill**

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*“I know that carbon trading can work because I’m already doing it. The key is getting farmers on board, not because trading makes them good people, but because it helps them create sustainable farms through a substantial financial incentive.”*

answer to having farmers become part of the climate solution lies in strong financial incentives — ones that can be provided by carbon markets. Altruism won’t be enough. We need to pay farmers in a coin they can recognize.

I work with an organization called Nori, which has created the world’s only public carbon dioxide removal marketplace. In a nutshell, corporations — for both voluntary and compliance reasons — are seeking new ways to offset the carbon emissions from their operations. Nori works as a middleman, helping companies to pay farmers like me to restore soil health and reduce carbon by planting cover crops and not tilling my fields.

It’s a workable solution, but carbon markets like the one created by Nori are still too small to really change farming in a meaningful way — mostly because whether corporations or individuals use them is totally optional and driven by — again — altruism. For carbon trading to be scaled up, there needs to be a government mandate that goes beyond corporate responsibility and requires companies to go carbon-neutral. Among other actions, that will mean buying and trading offsets.

But the government can’t act

alone. There needs to be a broad public demand for corporate carbon sustainability. The airline industry, for example, is a notorious carbon polluter that, through public pressure backing government mandates, could easily offset its impacts through carbon trading.

The next step is to use the carbon marketplace to create transparency in our food system and sell offsets to consumers through the food they buy. Much like the premium consumers voluntarily pay for organic produce and meat, consumers could pay a premium for food that is sustainably grown. That allows farmers to benefit twice — in getting paid for carbon offsets like cover crops, and in growing a more valuable food and serving the public.

I know that carbon trading can work because I’m already doing it — it’s just a matter of taking what Nori and I are doing and scaling it up to become a worldwide best practice. Government can help there. So can public support.

Mother Nature already sequesters carbon, whether it’s a forest or a prairie. By moving toward a future of carbon-smart agriculture, we’re getting closer to the natural ecosystem of the land — and giving farmers a compelling, viable and business-savvy reason to change.