Science Societies

Plant health doctor builds long-lasting relationships to support farmers, advance sustainability

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Lee Briese

“Beyond the sustainability goals, beyond the environmental goals, if my solutions can make sense logistically and economically in famers’ practices and long-term goals, then it is easy for them to do,” observes Dr. Lee Briese, a CCA who supports farmers in southeastern North Dakota.

As a Doctor of Plant Health, Briese brings more than 20 years of experience to the field while advising growers on 17 different commodity cash crops, reaching more than 80,000 acres. He considers himself to be a physician for his farmers’ crops, conducting a weekly check-up on the plants’ health, providing a report directly to the farmer, and writing a personalized “prescription” when needed.

“We have some highly erodible soils. We have some very wet soils. Those things are very specific, and we can’t use blanket solutions,” Briese says. “If we set things that work for the farmer and work for the environment at the same time, then I think it all works.”

Briese focuses on soil management by maintaining soil health, building up soil structure, and reducing erosion. He works with farmers to increase their knowledge about the scientific benefits of no-till practices, cover crop integration, and nutrient management in order to improve soil health.

“I’m the science communicator. It’s my job to understand the science in depth, and the problems specific to that person, and build the resources and solutions that fit their operation,” Briese explains. He advises farmers to develop a well-functioning soil that

cycles minerals, filters runoff, and supports biological diversity, recognizing that “soil health” can mean something different for each individual farmer and across different agricultural regions.

Critical Role of the Trusted Adviser

In Briese’s experience, the role of the trusted adviser is crucial in supporting farmers to build their operation’s economic viability as well as agronomic success. Similar to a physician, he emphasizes the value of building a long-term relationship with someone who can understand the intricacies of each field and each farmer’s specific challenges and goals. Briese explored this connection further while completing his recent doctoral dissertation, “Science Communication in Agriculture: The Role of the Trusted Adviser,” saying that much of what he learned in his studies reinforced his own personal experiences in the field.

Throughout his career, Briese has been committed to building this valuable trust with the farmers he supports, most of whom are now farming multi-generational operations. Over time, Briese has observed that operations with a history of adopting alternative technologies and practices are more likely to incorporate new conservation methods on their fields today. “There is a learned behavior through the family—this type of curiosity, innovation, and mindset that comes through from teachings from the previous generations.”

Briese is passionate about supporting this level of curiosity and innovation with the farmers he advises as it is passed from one generation to the next. When thinking of his own legacy, Briese shares,“I want to make a difference in agriculture and environments. I want to be the guy that helped them build soil, helped them save soil, helped them manage their farm.”

By sharing his scientific expertise and trusted advice, Briese is successfully making a difference in his North Dakota community while building stronger, more resilient soil ecosystems and creating a tradition of sustainable agriculture for farmers to adopt, improve, and expand upon for generations to come.

—Source: Field to Market: The Alliance for Sustainable Agriculture

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