Carbon Desk.

CAREERS COMPARED · 2026

Voluntary vs Compliance Carbon Markets — Which Side Should You Work In?

The two halves of the carbon market hire different people, reward different skills, and carry different risks. A career-focused comparison to help you choose where to aim.

Two markets, two career tracks

"Carbon markets" is really two markets wearing one name, and they hire differently. The **compliance** market exists because governments require it — cap-and-trade systems and border mechanisms that companies must comply with by law. The **voluntary** market exists because buyers choose it — companies purchasing carbon credits to meet their own climate commitments. They overlap at the edges, but as a career decision they point in different directions: different employers, different skills, different pay curves, and different kinds of risk.

This guide compares the two as *career tracks*, so you can aim deliberately rather than drifting into whichever one a recruiter happens to call about.

The compliance market, in brief

The compliance (or regulated) market is created by law. Governments cap emissions and issue or require allowances: the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS), the UK ETS, California's cap-and-trade, China's national ETS, and the newer border mechanism, CBAM, which puts a carbon price on certain imports into the EU. Under Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, a government-to-government compliance layer is also being built (see our Article 6 careers guide).

The defining feature for your career: demand here is driven by **regulation and deadlines**, not sentiment. When a rule takes effect, thousands of companies *must* act, which creates durable, non-discretionary hiring.

The voluntary market, in brief

The voluntary carbon market (VCM) is where companies and individuals buy credits by choice — to offset emissions, fund removals, or make climate claims. It runs on standards and registries like Verra and Gold Standard (see Verra vs Gold Standard vs Puro), project developers who create credits, ratings agencies who grade them, and marketplaces that trade them.

The defining feature for your career: demand here is driven by **corporate ambition, credit quality and trust**. It's more innovative and faster-moving, but also more cyclical — it rises and falls with corporate budgets, media scrutiny and integrity debates.

Who hires on each side

Compliance market employers: large industrial emitters and importers (building in-house compliance functions), trading houses and banks with emissions desks, trade-compliance and customs teams, specialist compliance consultancies, the exchanges and registries that run the schemes, government bodies and regulators, and the software vendors building CBAM and ETS reporting tools.

Voluntary market employers: carbon project developers (forestry, cookstoves, removals, biochar, DAC), standards and registries, ratings and MRV companies, marketplaces and brokers, corporate sustainability teams buying credits, and the climate-tech software firms serving them.

A note from the live feed: both sides are represented on Carbon Desk, tagged by market. You can browse compliance-market roles and voluntary-market roles separately to see the real mix.

The roles, compared

Core roles

- **Compliance:** CBAM/ETS reporting analyst, carbon trader (allowances), trade-compliance crossover, embedded-emissions specialist, policy and regulatory.
- **Voluntary:** project developer, MRV/verification specialist, carbon credit originator and trader, ratings analyst, methodology expert.

Skills valued

- **Compliance:** regulatory detail, customs and trade documentation, GHG accounting, scheme mechanics, scenario analysis.
- **Voluntary:** project development, field and science knowledge, methodology fluency, credit-quality judgement, commercial origination.

Entry routes

- **Compliance:** trade compliance, tax, customs, finance, policy.
- **Voluntary:** environmental science, forestry, development, finance, climate-tech.

Pay and stability

Neither side uniformly pays more, but the shape differs:

- **Compliance** tends to be steadier. Because demand is legally mandated, roles are less exposed to sentiment, and scarce expertise — CBAM, ETS, complex accounting — can command a premium precisely because the people who've done the work are thin. Trading allowances, like any trading seat, can pay very well with bonus on a real P&L.
- **Voluntary** has a wider spread. Well-funded removals and climate-tech firms pay at or above tech and finance benchmarks; earlier-stage developers and NGOs pay less. The upside in origination and carbon finance is real, but the market's cyclicality means more variance year to year.

For concrete ranges by role and region, see the Carbon Markets Salary Guide.

The risk trade-off

This is the honest heart of the decision:

- The **compliance** side is more durable but more procedural. The work is often regulatory and detail-heavy; the reward is stability and a demand curve set by law rather than by mood. The sharpest current spike is here — CBAM and ETS deadlines are creating roles faster than the talent pool is growing.
- The **voluntary** side is more dynamic but more volatile. The work is more entrepreneurial and closer to the science and the projects; the risk is that corporate budgets and integrity scandals can cool hiring quickly, as the market has seen before.

So which side should you choose?

- **You like rules, structure and stability, or come from tax/trade/finance:** aim at the compliance market. CBAM and ETS are the sharpest, most durable demand in carbon right now. Start with The CBAM Hiring Primer.
- **You like projects, science and building things, or come from environmental/development backgrounds:** aim at the voluntary market, on the developer, MRV or ratings side.
- **You're finance-first:** both sides have trading and structuring roles; follow where your product interest lies — allowances and compliance instruments, or credits and removals.
- **You're not sure yet:** the skills transfer more than you'd think. GHG accounting, MRV and carbon finance are valued on both sides, so a first role on either can pivot to the other later.

You don't have to marry one side. But knowing which one you're walking into — and why it hires — makes you a sharper candidate in the room.

Where to go next

New to the field entirely? Start with Breaking Into Carbon Markets. Weighing a credential? See the best carbon-market certifications and courses. Then browse live roles by market and function on Carbon Desk.

Sources

- UNFCCC — Article 6 of the Paris Agreement (compliance cooperation).
- European Commission — EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) and Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) overviews.
- Verra and Gold Standard — voluntary carbon standards and registries.
- ICVCM (Core Carbon Principles) and VCMI — voluntary-market integrity frameworks.

Market structures and rules evolve. Confirm current scheme details against official sources (European Commission, UNFCCC, the relevant registry) before acting on them.

Get the sharpest carbon roles first. Carbon Desk tracks carbon-markets, CBAM, compliance and decarbonization roles and sends the best ones to your inbox weekly — screened, categorised, free. Subscribe at carbondesk.global.