THE 7TH AFRICAN TEA CONVENTION & EXHIBITION

Theme: Beyond the Leaf

Regenerative Agriculture and Climate-Smart Tea Production

A flood and a drought are the same failure

Contribution: Economics and yield impacts of regenerative practices

Michael D. Ham · CEO, Wild Orchard

Session 5: Climate Resilience · 17 September 2026 · 13:50

THE LAST THREE YEARS IN THIS COUNTRY

2024

FLOOD

42 of 47 counties flooded.
41,063 acres of crops destroyed.
Rivers out of their banks in
Nandi and Kericho.

2025

DROUGHT

National production down 12.4%
in the first half. 323m kg to 283m.
Smallholders lost 16.3%.
Estates lost 12.3%.

2026

FLOOD

March. Flash flooding across
several counties. Dozens killed.
Farmland taken out again.

Forty million kilos of tea. In six months. Gone.

Sources: Tea Board of Kenya H1 2025 production data; Copernicus and ReliefWeb reporting on the 2024 Kenya floods; 2026 Kenya floods reporting.

Neither.

It is a hedge you are already paying for.

You are just paying for it in bad years instead of good ones.

Forty million kilos was not a compliance cost. That was the bill.

The question is not whether you pay. It is whether you pay in advance, where it compounds, or in arrears.

WE CALL THOSE WEATHER EVENTS. THEY ARE SOIL EVENTS.

A flood is rain the ground could not take in.

A drought is rain the ground did not hold.

20,000 gallons

of extra water held per acre, for every 1% more soil organic matter. Not mysticism. A sponge.

Rodale, 44 years, same ground: infiltration significantly faster under organic management. +31% corn in drought years.

There is no such thing as a drought-proof bush. There is such a thing as a drought-proof soil.

Sources: Rodale Institute Farming Systems Trial; NRDC and Noble Research Institute on soil organic matter and water-holding capacity.



THE SQUEEZE

The economics are decided in the 99% you never see.

$2.28

PER KG

Kenyan average across the first 24 Mombasa sales of 2026. Global prices falling a second year.

KSh 5,500

REAL COST / 50 KG BAG

NPK 26:5:5. The farmer pays 2,500. The Treasury carries the rest. That is not a price.

Not booked

THE ASSET UNDERNEATH

Your soil's ability to take water in and hold it. It changes every season, and it appears on no ledger, no grade and no auction catalogue.

Sources: Mombasa auction averages 2026; KTDA fertilizer pricing 2025-26.



LESS IN WHAT KIND OF YEAR?

Three continents. Three methods. One answer.

+31%

RODALE INSTITUTE · 44 YEARS

Organic against conventional, same ground, since 1981. Yields match in normal years. In drought years, organic corn yielded 31% more.

22% vs 8%

FRANCE · 1,262 FARMS, JUNE 2026

After the 2023 droughts, the least regenerative farms lost 22% of yield. The most regenerative lost 8%. Same drought. Same country.

+78%

20 FARMS, NORTHERN PLAINS

Regenerative fields grew 29% less grain and made 78% more profit. Profit tracked soil organic matter, not yield.

The honest cost: −5 to −20% yield in years 1 to 5. The return: input costs down 20 to 43%, positive in 3 to 5 years at every farm size.

Sources: Rodale Institute Farming Systems Trial; French national regenerative farming study, June 2026; LaCanne and Lundgren, PeerJ; BCG 2023.

THE HALF OF THE ECONOMICS WE ALWAYS SKIP

What it does inside a household

Fertilizer is not a cost line. It is a debt.

Bought on credit against future green-leaf payments. A 20–43% fall in input cost is not margin. It is a farmer who owes the factory less before the season starts.

The manure is already on the farm.

71% of Kenyan smallholders keep one to three cattle. Substitution turns an idle asset into a cash saving. Income without anybody raising a price.

Smallholders lost 16.3%. Estates lost 12.3%.

In the first half of 2025, the people with the least ground to spare lost the most of it. Tea Board of Kenya.

A household cannot average a hungry March.

An estate averages across a decade. For a smallholder the value of soil that holds water is not the higher average. It is the smaller hole in the bad year.

We keep offering farmers a higher mean when what they need is a shorter tail.



Jeju farmers took the rocks out.

Two years clearing volcanic rock so a seed could send a taproot down. Then close to ten years before that land gave a real harvest.

We have never turned on a tap.

The only tea farm on Jeju watered purely by rainfall. Every other farm on the island runs water.

They thought they were clearing rocks. They were digging a well.

The men who took those rocks out of the ground were not the men who took the first harvest off it.



THE OTHER END OF THE CHAIN

Who is asking now

3% / 80%

Producers here receive roughly three percent of what the consumer finally pays. Blending and packing take up to eighty.

Every one of you wants to move up that chain. So look at who is standing at the other end of it.

WHAT THEY ARE PAYING FOR

72%

say transparency is extremely important in choosing a food brand.

+22%

more buyers for Regenerative Organic Certified last year. Organic added 6.6%.

Nobody is paying for the word. They are paying for a sentence a buyer can check.

Sources: SOMO and FAO on value-chain shares; FMI and NielsenIQ transparency research; FoodNavigator-USA, March 2026.

THREE THINGS, AND ONE INVITATION

Measure it.

Soil organic carbon on the factory record, next to yield and grade. EATTA could standardise that inside a year.

Run the trial here.

Nobody has long-term side-by-side data for Kenyan tea. One catchment, two ways of farming, five years of honest measurement.

Plant for future generations.

Some fraction of every replanting from deep-rooted stock. Put it in the budget line where insurance goes.

COME AND SEE IT

Our farm on Jeju is open. Come at harvest. Bring your agronomist, bring your doubts, and bring a shovel.

You can see a leaf. You cannot see a root.