**How Naivasha flower farm attained carbon neutrality**

BY JAMES KAHONGEH

Jkgitau@ke.nationmedia.com

Naivasha flower farm Wildfire Flowers has accomplished a feat that few businesses globally have: carbon neutrality.

When the flower farm was certified as carbon-neutral by multinational One Carbon World in 2021, it joined an exclusive group of companies around the world that operate with the least amount of carbon emissions.

General manager Patrick Mbugua says the certification is the culmination of efforts to produce roses for export with the least negative impact on the environment that the company embarked on four years ago.

He recounts: ‘‘We were just curious to see how much carbon we emit through our production processes by the time we deliver a flower stem to the market. We invited One Carbon World to audit us and to identify the amount of our emissions.’’

One Carbon World is a UN-affiliated institution that helps companies to measure, reduce and compensate for their greenhouse gas emissions. ‘‘They collected data at every stage of our production, which they later analysed and advised us on methods of dealing with the emissions.’’

Wildfire Flowers has spent money on solar energy to power their processes and to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels, an investment Patrick describes as worthwhile and transformative.

“We have reduced our power cost by between 20 and 30 percent, which is significant for our business. This was a purely commercial decision because of the high cost of grid power in Kenya compared to other economies such as Ethiopia.”

He, however, notes that Kenya has a high standing globally in clean production owing to its clean energy sources, including wind, solar, thermal and hydro power.

To be declared carbon neutral, a business must mitigate against most of its emissions. But even so, it is impossible to avoid emissions entirely. He explains: ‘‘You pay for emissions that are unavoidable. This money that goes into projects that support environmental sustainability around the world.’’ The concept is called carbon offsetting.

Wildfire Flowers had two options to offset their remaining carbon emissions: to invest either in a reforestation project in Uruguay or a wind power plant in India. But why a forest in South America while Kenya has multiple forests?

Patrick observes that none of Kenya’s forests are rated for carbon offsetting. “From a business perspective, it is unfortunate that we are taking money outside the country yet we have forests locally that we can help to conserve. If Eburu Forest, for instance, which is close to Naivasha’s flower-growing region, were rated, this would allow flower farms here to invest money towards its conservation.”

To what extent does the flower market influence practices in flower production? Patrick says that horticulture and flower production is among the self-regulated industries in Kenya, majorly because of the stringent requirements on what can sell in European and American markets.

“How you produce and use your water, power and fertiliser resources and how you look after your employees is coming up as a major issue in the market. If certain agrochemicals are banned in production of flowers, vegetables and fruits in Europe, for instance, you cannot use them even if you are not in Europe. Otherwise your products won’t sell in those markets.”

So far, no market has made carbon neutrality a requirement for sale of flowers. Patrick, though, believes it is a matter of time before this becomes a threshold.

Few flower farms have embarked on this journey, though. Why sis this so? Patrick puts it down as a question of consciousness, but argues that the subject is gaining traction among companies in manufacturing and processing.

‘‘Businesses are now starting to factor in other non-quantifiable costs in their production processes. If you do not estimate costs to the environment and to the people in your value chain, it means these two entities are paying for your profits,’’ he says, adding that companies must expand their perspective of the bottom line beyond profits.

The company has also gone into regenerative agriculture by minimising its mechanisation such as using tractors to plough land, and instead using simple implements that conserve the soil structure by locking carbon in the soil.

“We practice professional composting where we use green waste from our farm and other farms to create manure for use in our roses instead of relying on inorganic fertilisers.”

Are there immediate benefits for being carbon neutral? Patrick says that the new model of business requires companies to focus not only on the traditional single-line bottom line, but a triple-line bottom line that prioritises profits, people and the planet (Triple P).

He adds that there is growing consciousness in the international flower market where buyers interrogate the amount of carbon emissions producers make. The less the emissions, the higher the acceptability, he says.

While there is currently no price differentiation in stems produced with less carbon emissions and those that are not, Patrick believes that ultimately, producers will be able to monetise their carbon neutrality.

He says: “Our desire is to make our carbon neutrality visible in the market. To do this, we are using simple tools and systems to position ourselves as a company that is keen on reducing emissions for a safer planet.”

The carbon-neutral certification is valid for a year and producers ‘‘have to assess their emissions every year and determine how to mitigate them.’’

To make the journey smooth, Patrick says the company had to train its senior management on the importance of sustainable operations, an investment he says has yielded fruit.