

1886.
NEW ZEALAND.

THE RABBIT NUISANCE ACT

(REPORT ON THE WORKING OF), IN WAIHEMO AND TAPANUI.

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

SIR,—

Wellington, February, 1886.

I regret that the pressure of my public duties since my return from the Middle Island has de'ayed the preparation of the report of inquiries which I was instructed by you to make into the working of the Rabbit Nuisance Act in the Waihemo and Tapanui Districts.

I took, at Palmerston, voluminous evidence shorthand reports of which I attach hereto. The greater part of this is not what can properly be called evidence in the strict sense of the word; but I thought it advisable to allow the widest possible latitude to all who had any facts to bring forward or opinions to express, so that none should have room to say that they had not every opportunity afforded them of giving the results of their experience.

I found the complaints to come mainly from the holders of comparatively small properties, who allege that, do what they will to reduce the pest on their respective holdings, the rabbits come down in swarms from the large runs and overrun them, devouring their grass and growing crops. This is undoubtedly the fact and, in the nature of things, must remain so in spite of every effort that can be made to check it by the officers of the department, by the smaller property-holders, and by the runholders and other large proprietors themselves. The small holdings are composed of the best soil and the least broken country; whilst the runs comprise the poorer and more rugged hill-tops—difficult and often impossible of access; and among whose rocky summits and precipitous gullies the rabbits breed, almost undisturbed, in tens of thousands; whence they issue in hordes in search of food and descend upon the cultivated grounds below.

It is very natural that hard-working men living on and, for the most part, themselves cultivating their moderate-sized properties, should feel aggrieved at seeing their crops devastated by the hordes of hungry enemies descending from the lands of their wealthier neighbours. It is, however, difficult to see a remedy for this state of things. If the larger proprietors could be deprived of their estates and sent out of the country the result would only be an aggravation of the evil; and I am bound to say that my inquiries have led me to the conclusion that the large owners have used every possible exertion to cope with the pest. That those exertions have not been completely successful is to be deplored; but that they have been made is beyond doubt, in my mind.

I do not think that any complaints which can be characterised as being of a serious nature have been established against the Inspector or the agents who act under him. My inquiries have satisfied me that they are performing their difficult and onerous duties conscientiously and as well as the circumstances by which they are surrounded will allow. They appear to me to do their best to keep all holders of property, large and small, up to their work; but the country is rough and difficult of access, the rabbits are in countless numbers and reproduce themselves with proverbial rapidity, whilst the current year has been a season abnormally favourable to their increase. There have been no floods to drown the callow young ones in their nests, and the feed on the high lands has been burnt up to an unprecedented degree, thus forcing the rabbits to an unusual extent to descend to the lower lands. An opinion was expressed by some of those who gave evidence that it would be better to remove the Inspectors altogether and leave the settlers to themselves. I cannot concur in this, but I feel bound to mention it for your consideration.

Some of them thought it would be advisable to remove the officers now in the district and replace them by others. I do not think so. Two changes have already taken place within a recent period, and if a third were now made, within less than two years of the last, a feeling of insecurity would be engendered, and a risk would be run of the Inspector in charge forming an opinion that activity on his part was a disqualification, and that not to do his duty was the surest way to consult his own interest. From what I have seen of Inspector Miles I have formed the opinion that he is a thoroughly conscientious officer, able and willing to do his duty, but not able to please everybody or caring to try, and, above all things, unable to eradicate the rabbits under impossible circumstances.

At Lawrence I also took evidence from a few gentlemen, holders of both large and small properties in the Tapanui District. Very little of any importance was elicited. Some of the settlers seemed to think that the officers of the department had not been strict enough with their neighbours, and some thought the rabbits could be exterminated if the Government would pay a high price for skins. But the charges against the officers were not serious; and, on the whole, I have no special report to make respecting this district.

I have, &c.,

The Hon. the Colonial Secretary, Wellington.

G. S. COOPER.

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