

1896.
NEW ZEALAND.

“LAND FOR SETTLEMENTS ACT, 1894”

(REPORT ON).

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly in compliance with Section 39 of “The Land for Settlements Act, 1894.”

The LAND PURCHASE INSPECTOR to the Hon. the MINISTER of LANDS.

SIR,—

Department of Land for Settlements, Wellington, 27th June, 1896.

I have the honour to report on the transactions under “The Land for Settlements Act, 1894,” for the twelve months ending the 31st March, 1896.

By the Amendment Act of 1895 the number of the members of the Land Purchase Board was increased from three to five. The Board as now constituted consists of the Land Purchase Inspector as Chairman, the Surveyor-General, the Commissioner of Taxes—these for the whole colony; with the Commissioner of Crown Lands, and a member of the Land Board in each land district, who are members only for the business arising within their respective districts. This came into operation on the 1st November, 1895, and has removed the deadlock which formerly existed whenever any one of the three members could not attend to form a quorum of that number.

There were twenty meetings of the Board held during the year for business in the following land districts: Auckland, 2; Hawke's Bay, 2; Wellington, 2; Marlborough, 1; Westland, 4; Canterbury, 6; and Otago, 3 meetings.

Estates of a total area of 541,966 acres were offered during the year. Of that area more than one-half was found on inspection to be more suitable for pastoral than agricultural occupation, and, not being adapted for close settlement, was declined. Of the remainder, the Board recommended the purchase of estates of an aggregate area of 71,877 acres, at certain prices, which, being approved by Government, were submitted to the owners and accepted for fifteen estates, containing 43,195 acres, at a total price of £214,627, or an average price per acre of very nearly £5. In this is included the Ardgowan Estate, of 4,241 acres, taken compulsorily in terms of the Act of 1894. The award fixed by Compensation Court, held in September, 1895, was £34,600, or £8 3s. per acre.

Since the commencement of the system of purchase of land for settlements, in October, 1892, to 31st March, 1896, 28 estates of a total area of 86,919 acres have been bought, for £377,553 6s. The cost of roading, surveying, and administration was £11,761 11s. 7d. additional.

The land acquired has been of two classes—namely, rural arable land for farms, and suburban land for garden-cultivation in 1- to 5-acre lots. A large number of small areas around Christchurch have been offered from time to time, but the prices asked, in most cases, have been more on the scale of building-lots than of garden or small-farm lots, and practically prohibitive for the latter purpose. Four areas, comprising in all 190 acres, have been purchased within from a mile and a half to three miles from the Christchurch Post-office. Two have been settled on, in lots of 1 to 3 acres, and the other two areas, having only been recently acquired, are now in process of preparation for settlement.

Nearly all the lands purchased under “The Land for Settlements Act, 1894,” have been much improved, and are in excellent heart and condition. Unless they are kept up in this state by skilful husbandry, and by settlers who have the means to do so, they will deteriorate and fall in value. It therefore becomes imperative in the public interest that in the administration of such valuable lands the conditions of the leases in respect of rotation and limitation of cropping, upkeep of fences, and so on, should be strictly enforced. In the eagerness to obtain such lands artful combinations of families and friends lend themselves as applicants for some favourite section, so as to obtain as many chances of a successful draw at the ballot as possible. This acts most unfairly to those who do not resort to that practice. Some power of check should be given the Land Boards to prevent the scramble.

During the year considerable attention has been given to the question of dealing with the pastoral country of Nelson and Marlborough Land Districts, the leases of which run out in the latter half of 1896, but are carried on to 28th February, 1897, as a more convenient time of the year for shifting stock should there be any change of tenants. In nearly all the runs the lower slopes and valleys have been made freehold, thereby either shutting off the higher-lying Crown lands from access, or, by spotting, rendering the adjacent Crown lands practically worthless. Section 4 of “The Land for Settlements Act, 1894,” gives power to deal with this either by purchase or exchange of lands. A large number of adjustments will require to be made if all the Crown lands are to be available for future occupation. A beginning has been made in this important work, but very much more remains to be done.

I have, &c.,

JAMES MCKERROW,
Land Purchase Inspector.

The Hon. the Minister of Lands.