

REPORT.

No. 372.—Petition of C. G. DALGETY and Others, of Otago and Canterbury.

PETITIONERS pray for the passing of a measure similar to "The Pastoral Tenants Relief Act, 1895," on account of losses of sheep from unprecedented falls of snow.

I am directed to report that the Committee have inquired into statements contained in the petition, and have taken evidence thereon, which they now report to the House. They find that on the date mentioned there was a severe snowstorm, which resulted in a heavy loss of stock in certain parts of Otago and Canterbury. The evidence, however, shows that, apart from the storm in question, a number of causes have contributed to the serious reduction that of late years is said to have occurred in the stock-carrying capacity of certain pastoral runs; and that the managers of these properties believe an extension of existing leases, with better security for improvements, would encourage and facilitate the adoption of remedial measures. It is contended that the terms and conditions under which the land is held are of such a nature as to discourage, if not prevent steps being taken that would secure stock against exceptional stress of weather, and improve the value of the pastures. The conclusion seems, therefore, unavoidable, that, owing to the reluctance of these runholders to invest sufficient capital on improvements for which they might not be fully recouped when their leases terminate, the properties are not efficiently worked. The concession applied for does not appear to be so much a remission of rent as an extension of the term of the leases, and increased compensation for improvements at the end of the term. Opposed to such a concession is the policy of land settlement. Numerous signed memorials indicate that if the larger runs that are suitable for the purpose were subdivided into moderate-sized holdings, they would be eagerly taken up and made much more productive than at present. The question must, therefore, be determined whether in the interests of the State it is desirable that the sufferers by the snowstorm referred to in the petition should receive an extension of the term of their leases, or increased security of tenure, as compensation for their losses, or if their leases should be allowed to expire in due course, so that the State may be free to give effect where it is considered necessary to the demand for subdivision and closer settlement. Your Committee, after weighing carefully the evidence, and taking the circumstances surrounding the prayer of the petitioners into consideration, do not feel justified in recommending legislation that may have the effect of locking up land, that is being improved with public works, from an influx of settlers. While expressing sympathy with the petitioners on account of the losses they have sustained, they are unable to recommend any special form of relief beyond what may be allowed if the powers of the Land Boards are extended. They recommend that the Boards be asked to formulate a scheme that will have the effect of giving them more power to deal with the land upon such terms as they think advisable in the interests of the State and the occupiers, but that such provision should be subject to the approval of the Minister of Lands.

2nd November, 1904.

A. W. Hogg, Chairman.

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

SATURDAY, 3RD SEPTEMBER, 1904.

Hon. Sir W. J. Steward: I may say that the nature of the present proceedings is explained in this way: These gentlemen have come up from the South for the purpose of giving evidence before the Lands Committee as to losses sustained through snow in July of last year, their petition being before the House and having been referred to the Lands Committee for consideration. Owing to the want-of-confidence debate and the order of the House that Committees should not sit while it is taking place, these gentlemen have been several days in Wellington, and some of them must return south to-day. Therefore, as the Committee cannot formally meet this morning, by the courtesy of the Minister of Lands it has been arranged that those gentlemen who are leaving to-day shall make a statement, which the House will be asked to refer to the Committee for consideration. The Committee will then, no doubt, arrange to hear the evidence of those witnesses who can remain. I think Mr. Tripp was mentioned as wishing to get away to-day. Will you please make such statement as you wish, Mr. Tripp, in support of the petition?