

WESTLAND.

As an agricultural district Westland is as yet in a somewhat undeveloped state, due to the fact that until recent years attention was almost wholly devoted to the development of the mining resources. The first stages of transition from mining to agriculture must of necessity be slow, as, for the reasonable protection of the miner until such time as the land has been thoroughly tested, tenures of sufficient permanency to warrant settlers investing the capital necessary to bring the land to a reproductive state cannot be granted. It is, however, essential that lands be not withheld from lease for any unreasonable length of time after active mining operations have ceased, as the interval of inactivity seriously retards the progress of the district. The withholding from selection of lands that have not within recent years been worked in view of the possibility that minerals may at a later date be found in the deeper levels is not justified, as in the meantime the surface soil could be turned to profit, and the fact of his being required to compensate the farmer for the clearing of the land would not deter the miner from working the ground, provided that a reasonable basis for assessment of the compensation were provided. From an agricultural point of view, Westland has suffered somewhat severely in the past on account of the absence of a tenure that would satisfactorily solve the difficulty as between miner and settler. Regulations have, however, now been issued which, while offering security of tenure to the settler, reduce the liability of the miner to such an extent that it should be possible to lease all lands not actually covered by mining licenses.

On account of the moistness of the climate and the uncertainty of the seasons, the district is not adapted to agricultural farming, but in the matter of dairying and grazing, prospects of a very useful future are decidedly promising. The suitability of the lands for dairying is now being recognized, and those factories at present operating are producing very gratifying returns. A new factory has been established at Kumara during the year, and three new co-operative dairy-factory associations have also been formed. The establishment of dairy factories is resulting in increasing land-values, but competent judges aver that ruling prices are lower than those for similar classes of land in any other district. This is no doubt due to some extent to the isolation of the district, but also largely to the fact that the possibilities of the land for dairying and pastoral purposes are not generally known. The settlers almost wholly depend merely upon rough clearing and surface-sown grass, and while values are low they can thus obtain a fair return for their outlay; but with the advent of scientific farming, the productive value will be largely increased, and enhanced prices will be demanded. Inquiries from other parts of the Dominion, more especially for cattle runs, are fairly numerous. There is at present a considerable area of land notified in the Crown Lands Guide open for selection, but practically the whole is situated in the southern part of the district, which is as yet in an undeveloped state, and somewhat sparsely populated. The sections are generally bush-covered, and when cleared and grassed would be suitable for dairying purposes; but as there are at present no dairy factories in existence further south than Wataroa, some sixty-two miles from Hokitika, there is no inducement for men with small means to acquire the sections, as the only purpose for which they could be used at present is for rearing and fattening cattle, and for these purposes large areas and considerable capital are required. Several blocks of land in the northern district are at present being subdivided for settlement under the special regulations recently issued.

A splendid crop of grass has been recorded in all parts of the district during the past year, and the supply of milk to the factories has been well maintained. The wet season has, however, been somewhat unfavourable for getting new areas under grass on account of the difficulty in getting a satisfactory burn. A considerable area of bush has been felled, and in the case of those settlers who were fortunate enough to strike favourable weather-conditions, the new grass and green crops have proved very satisfactory. The hay-crops were generally a failure. The settlers as a whole are very well satisfied with the year's returns, and good progress is being made generally.

Unfortunately the warm rains at the close of the year produced very severe floods in a number of the rivers, and somewhat serious damage resulted to roads and bridges, while the holdings of settlers in some localities suffered considerably. The greatest damage occurred at inter-Wanganui, where the Wanganui River cut a new channel through a valuable dairying district. The actual losses in lands and stock did not amount to any very considerable sum, but the prospective damage to property and consequent decline in values that will result unless the water is prevented from flowing in the new channel is a very serious matter. However, temporary protective works have already been effected, and the promise of financial assistance from the Government in the erection of a permanent stop-bank has saved the situation, as the settlers in the locality feel that the safety of their holdings from further damage is assured.

On account of the improvement in the flax-market the whole of the flax-mills in the district, which have been closed down for the past two years, have recommenced operations.

The whole of the sawmills were in active operation during practically the whole of the year, and a total of approximately 54,286,300 ft. of timber was cut, but the market at present, especially for white-pine, is somewhat dull, and cutting operations are consequently restricted.

In the matter of the eradication of noxious weeds, operations on Crown lands have been confined to ragwort and Californian thistle, which have been systematically cleared; but it is very necessary that action should also be taken to deal with blackberry, which is a very serious menace to the agricultural future of the district. The eradication will involve the expenditure of a very large sum of money, but it is a matter that demands early attention. It is impracticable to obtain any satisfactory and permanent results by cutting and grubbing, as a very large proportion of the infested areas comprises mining tailings from which the roots cannot be removed at a reasonable cost, but up to the present no other satisfactory method of eradicating this pest has been discovered. Fair results have at times been obtained by spraying with a solu-