

HARRY MAY SKEET sworn and examined. (No. 62.)

1. *The Chairman.*] You are the Commissioner of Crown Lands for the Auckland District?—Yes.

2. I believe you have had experience in Westland and Southland districts as well as in Auckland in regard to dealing with timber matters?—Yes.

3. Do you consider from your experience here that the system of having the timber all measured before it is sold a better one than the one in vogue in the South Island?—Yes.

4. Under it the Government get better returns, and there is less waste of timber?—Yes. I consider that not a single stick of timber should be sold excepting under proper measurement. Then we know what quantity we have, and the buyer knows what he is buying. There should be only the one system, and the administration should be entirely under the Lands Department, thus saving the expense of the present dual control. Under the latter system you never know what is going on.

5. And also for the reason that the Warden has no officers with the technical knowledge requisite to enable them to deal with these matters?—Of course, he gets the information from the Lands Department. But he also sits as a Magistrate, and is always amenable to legal argument, and the more plausible the lawyer is in putting his case before the Warden-Magistrate the more likely is the latter to be swayed by the interests advocated by the lawyer. I have always noticed that when a decision is dependent almost solely on legal argument it is likely to be very amenable to the same. However, we do not deal with lawyers at all, but with the matter simply on its merits in the interests of the State.

6. In regard to the laying-off of scenic reserves, would you advocate that they should be confined to broken country which is unsuitable for agricultural or pastoral purposes, or also set apart in connection with settlement lands where there is a piece of bush?—I would not lay off a scenic reserve excepting it is in a position where it would be reasonably safe from fire, or from the damage caused by settlers. If it is abutting on a road-line you could protect that piece, but to distribute these reserves about in little odd corners is an absolute mistake. The settlers fire the environments; then there is the excuse of the spread of noxious weeds—which generally come from their own land—and many other pretexts to get the Government to spend money on clearing the weeds or something else. Unless in large areas absolutely protected from the risk of fire I am not in favour of setting aside such reserves. I am in favour of making reservations for climatic purposes.

7. Would you advocate the tops of the high hills being preserved for climatic purposes?—That is the whole consideration. Here in the north we have had no rain for six months, and the streams are dry. It is only by means of these bush-areas on the tops of the hills that there is any water conserved. My experience is that above a certain elevation the land is not very useful for stock-raising, and we have not got enough bush on our hilltops to preserve the natural rainfall of the country.

8. As to the State Forest Reserve at Raetea, would it not be better to change it to a climatic reserve to prevent any dealing with it in future as the result of pressure?—The Land Board has nothing to do with the State forests—only the Commissioner. This reserve should be made, as far as the low land is concerned, inalienable, and then it would be a national asset in years to come. Bush collects the rain, and we are told the Auckland Settlement up north has been a failure because of the wetness of the climate; but if we felled the bush on the high land that collects the moisture we shall have dry years in the future.

9. *Mr. Murdoch.*] Central Otago over again?—Yes. Oamaru is one of the driest parts in New Zealand. The clouds are drawn away from the coast and collect away back on the hills. The rain does not fall on the coast, but with large areas of bush along there the moisture would be held and distributed.

10. *The Chairman.*] When in the Taranaki District did the question of deer damaging the scenic reserves come under your notice?—We had no deer then. Two were let go on Mount Egmont, but one was killed. The cattle are eating the bark of the trees at Mount Egmont on the Stony River side. They bark the houhou, but will not touch the mahoe or tawhero.

11. And if all the young shrubs are eaten out there is the greater liability of fire sweeping the bush away?—Certainly.

12. In regard to the estimates of timber available in the forests made by the Department at various times without accurate measurements taking place, do you think much reliance should be placed on those estimates?—They are only estimates. In Westland I used to write them down to one-third. The timber may not be there. If you can get small areas you can make your estimates with a reasonable degree of accuracy, but not over miles of country.

13. What about estimates of timber growing in the Fiord County of Southland?—You could not do it. Our estimates here of small areas are sometimes one-third less than they should be, and sometimes a bit more.

14. *Mr. Murdoch.*] As to the forest reserve at Broadwood, the Ranger evidently recommended that a large area of 9,000 acres should be cut up for settlement?—Sold, I think.

15. Was that recommendation due to local pressure?—No. He recommended a large area being kept back and made a climatic reserve—it was on the top of the hill—but the other part being fit for settlement should be cut up and used. His report would be subject to revision, of course. He recommended a strip along the main range.

16. It looked to me when the Commission inspected the locality as though what is there should be retained?—Well, all the better. There is a legitimate demand for land, and people tackle places now they would not take up years ago.