

WANGANUI, MONDAY, 28TH APRIL, 1913.

THOMAS DICK CUMMINS examined. (No. 63.)

1. *Mr. Adams.*] I understand you wish to make some representations on behalf of the River Trust?—Yes. I am the chairman of the Wanganui River Trust, and our duties are somewhat in common with those being performed by your Commission. The principal work of the Trust is clearing the river-channel and keeping the river open for navigation, but if we cannot maintain the water at a certain height our position will be a bad one, involving the stoppage of navigation and the waste of the expenditure already incurred. Looking to the future, unless the forests at the source of the river are reasonably conserved navigation may become impossible in the summer months, when the river is naturally low. The vast quantity of the water that comes down the Wanganui River is from the mountains of Ruapehu and Tongariro, and the Ongarue Stream and tributaries. Therefore, if the bush in these localities is destroyed, our sources of water-supply will be seriously endangered. I beg to hand to the Commission a copy of a report by one of our late members, Mr. John T. Stewart, C.E., on the subject of bush-preservation on the watershed and banks of the Wanganui River. The late Mr. Stewart was a very live man, of more than ordinary intelligence, keen powers of observation, and well qualified to deal with this matter. It will afford all information on the subject of water-conservation as the matter affects the Wanganui River. I support his views on behalf of the Trust, and strongly urge the Commission to take the necessary steps to conserve the bush at the headwaters of this river for climatic reasons, commercial reasons, scenery-preservation, and in the interests of the river and district generally.

2. We are in sympathy with you regarding the matter. Have you any specific recommendation to make to the Commission in support of your views?—I base the whole of my argument on the report of Mr. Stewart.

3. *Mr. Clarke.*] It has been represented to us that an effort is being made by some one to acquire a portion of the area now supposed to be under the control of the Trust. Is that the fact?—All Crown land to a strip one mile wide has been reserved up to the skyline for scenic purposes. As far as we are concerned we are not so keen on that reservation as we are over conserving the sources of the river. If you look at the map of the river supplied by Mr. Stewart you will find that the watershed is rather a peculiar one. Local rains do not affect the watershed from Pipiriki down, and we do not think that close to the river great damage would be done by small holdings of from 50 to 200 acres being allowed; we are looking more to the necessity of protecting the sources of the river. Four years ago I made an inspection of the river when the water was lower than ever before in its history, and we found a reasonable quantity coming in, but it was all flowing from the larger streams, the smaller ones not affecting the river at all, which flow from the source. It is probable, however, that the one-mile-wide strip on the banks is of material assistance to the river flow. The Trust is very jealous in regard to any bush being touched, as it is anxious to conserve the whole mile reserve with the exception of a small unimproved place here and there which will be revenue-producing.

4. *Dr. Cockayne.*] That one-mile reservation is of great assistance in preserving other parts from fire, and if you allow settlement here and there in that reserve are you not increasing the risk of the bush being burnt and thus affecting your water-conservation?—I appreciate your argument, but the only portion of the land on the river-bank that is likely to be brought to a profit for the sake of producing revenue is the area that is fern-clad only. We conserve all the bush at the head of the river, and only lots not held for scenic or water-supply purposes do we wish to put on the market.

5. *Mr. Adams.*] Do you appreciate the danger from fire?—Quite. On occasions the Scenery Board has only taken up to the skyline, when it would have been far better to have taken the one-mile-wide radius for fire-prevention purposes.

6. *Mr. Murdoch.*] You are of opinion that the headwaters of the streams from the Ongarue downwards should be conserved also to help feed the river?—Yes. I might say that recently two deputations waited on the Trust regarding their fencing-lines. They wanted a certain amount of bush land leased to them in order to improve their boundaries. I agreed with them, as I think that bush that is not needed for scenic purposes or for conserving the water, but which might possibly be revenue-producing, should be sold or leased. At a meeting of the Trust next Friday we will probably ask the Commissioner of Crown Lands or the Under-Secretary to detach an officer to accompany a member of the Trust to examine these lands that we think are fern-clad with a view to utilizing them for revenue-producing purposes, or retaining them for scenic purposes. On that report we will act later on. I do not think the Trust would ever ask for more than from 6,000 to 7,000 acres over the whole four hundred miles of the river to be placed on the market, and it is all fern-clad hills.

7. *Mr. W. A. Veitch., M.P.*] I indorse all Mr. Cummins has said. The Wanganui River is a very important public highway, and if its present utility through the want of conserving the water-supply is minimized the State will be put to an enormous expense in building roads and railways to carry the traffic that now is, and should in the future be, carried on that river. Even if the reservation of all the land the Chairman has urged should be taken costs the country a large sum it will be money well spent, and will mean a saving in the end. Owing to the importance of the Wanganui River and its tributaries to the commerce of this country, it seems out of the question for the Commission to adequately deal with the matter in the short time allowed, and I therefore suggest that your members should return to Wanganui before making their report and deal more fully with the question brought before you to-day. I propose to make representations to the Prime Minister to the effect that the local requirements are of such magnitude to Wanganui in particular and New Zealand in general that it is absolutely necessary that the matter should be dealt with finally and adequately by this Commission.