

THURSDAY, 16TH OCTOBER, 1913.

FREDERICK SIDNEY POPE, Secretary of Agriculture, examined. (No. 6.)

1. *The Chairman.*] Mr. Pope, the Committee are now dealing with the question of the aggregation of land, and one of the witnesses, Mr. Hornblow, made certain statements with regard to the Californian thistle being allowed to obtain on some of the large blocks. He used this as an argument in favour of preventing aggregation of land. The Committee thought, seeing there was a complaint of favouritism against the Department of which you are the head, it would be only fair that you should have an opportunity of making a statement on the point. I will read to you the paragraphs:—

“You mentioned that there is Californian thistle growing on some of these large blocks. Are the Rangers carrying out their duties in seeing they are kept in check?—No. I might mention that there is a good deal of dissatisfaction in connection with the leniency shown to the big squatters throughout the Kawhatau Valley.

“On these aggregated lands is it possible to keep down the thistles as easily as it is on smaller areas?—No; that is the trouble that the smaller settlers complain of. In the Kawhatau Valley my attention has been drawn to the fact on more than one occasion when going through the valley that some of the settlers who have the larger estates have neglected to keep the Californian thistle down, and the Inspectors have been told not to interfere with the large landowners in regard to cutting the thistles.

“Told by whom?—I understand, by the Department.

“Can you prove that?—I have letters in my possession written by men in the Kawhatau Valley. I was shown acres of Californian thistles in full bloom, and it was reported that the owners were told that no action would be taken against them by the Department. I am referring to the Gorrings and others. I could bring evidence to prove that it is a fact from the settlers themselves that the thistles have not been cut. They think it is criminal for the large landholders to be allowed to let their Californian thistles thrive when their neighbours have to cut them down. I was taken over two properties belonging to neighbours of the Gorrings where the thistle had started and they had kept it down by cutting it out, while right over the fence you could see the Californian thistle in full bloom and no one interferes with them.”

Now, that is the statement, and the Committee would like to know whether any such favouritism has been shown, or whether there has been any discrimination between the large and small landholder?—No. The Department has never shown any discrimination between the large and small landholder. I have never been able to find any shadow of foundation for such statements. Any Inspector who did follow such a course would be in serious trouble with the Department. So far as the Department is concerned no such favouritism has ever been countenanced in any way whatever, directly or indirectly. The statement that some instructions had been given was entirely inaccurate. No instructions that large landholders, or any other landholders, were to be allowed to let their Californian thistles flourish have ever been issued.

2. *Hon. Mr. Buddo.*] Was it not said that the Department was discriminating?—The policy of the Department in regard to the administration of the Noxious Weeds Act has not undergone any change in recent years. It is the same now as it has been any time during the last five years.

3. Have you charge of the Noxious Weeds Inspectors?—I have charge of the whole Department, including the Noxious Weeds Inspectors.

4. In a district like Mangaweka, how far is a Noxious Weeds Inspector to be expected to control?—Do you mean geographically? If so, I could not give him the exact boundaries of any district. Each Inspector has a large area.

5. Would it be more than one county?—No.

6. You think it would not be a larger area than the Rangitikei County?—No.

7. Is his whole time taken up in inspecting various properties?—Yes.

8. In the event of his observing thistles, presumably Californian thistles, going to seed in a district, has he orders to take action against the offender?—Yes. He gives him, in the first place, a more or less friendly notice—a printed notice, not the legal document—that he is expected to do the necessary work. If that has no effect it is followed up by a legal warning, and actual prosecution if no attempt is made to comply with the Inspector's orders.

9. Have you been able to go out into your districts and see for yourself how far the Act has been complied with?—No, not to any extent. That is done by Mr. Clifton: he deals with any matters of that kind more closely than I do. Mr. Clifton has spent a great deal of time in the district under discussion.

10. Have you reason to believe with the evidence before you that the Act has been complied with, especially in a case such as mentioned in the evidence submitted to you?—The Act is not fully complied with in any part of New Zealand. It has never been the policy of the Department to drive the Noxious Weeds Act to the full. To do so would mean the hunting of a very large number of settlers off their land.

11. Were they to comply with the Act fully they would be unable to remain in occupation of their land?—A good many of them—hundreds.

12. Presuming the subject we are now on to be Californian thistle, what does the Department insist on to comply with the Act?—That land should be cleared to prevent seeding.

13. Do you not think that if land is fit to be occupied at all that the Department should insist on the prevention of seeding?—Well, of course, that is the theory of the thing. Theoretically we do, but it is not practicable in all cases. There are plenty of parts of the country where there are immense areas of Californian thistle, but it is absolutely impossible for the landholders to deal with them in the strict terms of the Act. What the Inspectors do is to exercise an amount of discretion. They administer the Act as far as it appears to them to be reasonable.