

REPORT OF MR. E. CLIFTON.

At the conference of agricultural and pastoral societies, at the meetings of farmers' unions, and very specially at the session of this year of the Council of Agriculture, the control of noxious weeds has been very comprehensively discussed. This subject has also been referred to agricultural associations throughout the Dominion. The officers of the Department of Agriculture have year after year furnished very complete reports on their operations and on the results obtained. As Director of that division of the Department of Agriculture to which the administration of the Noxious Weeds Act was confided I have endeavoured to place the position as fully as possible before those conferences and before the agricultural community. We may therefore feel with all assurance that the subject is well known throughout New Zealand.

The result is that it may be fairly accepted that the consensus of opinion is that in the best interests of the community a control is necessary, and that this control should continue to be confided to the State. The question resolves itself into one of administration of control—that it should be so exercised and maintained that the maximum of efficiency with the minimum of irritation should result. It was decidedly the method of exercising this control that was chiefly discussed by the delegates who addressed the Council on this subject. The necessity of control was probably the principal reason. There was also the fact that the Parliament of the Dominion would most unwillingly reopen legislation on the subject of noxious weeds, and most certainly the question could not be entertained at present.

The chief considerations may be set out as—(1.) Is the method of control reasonably efficient? (2.) Can it be increased without undue cost, hardship, and irritation on the community? (3.) Is the statute administered with discretion? (4.) Which weeds should be more specially controlled? (5.) Control on Crown and Native lands.

1. The statute is administered by local Inspectors, who are under the immediate observation of Field Supervisors. These are really group officers. The whole force of local Inspectors and group officers are under the supervision of the Director and Assistant Director of the Fields Division of the Department of Agriculture; and, further, through the Secretary of that Department and through the Hon. Minister of Agriculture the general policy of the administration of the control is defined. All who are concerned in the administration of the Noxious Weeds Act, from the Hon. Minister to the local Inspector, recognize that a wide discretion is demanded and essential; that there are districts where certain scheduled weeds—as blackberry, Canadian or corn thistle, and ragweed—are of so great or general distribution that control is not possible: those consist chiefly of lands in open forest, or ordinary forest lands in the process of clearing, or those felled and cleared and grassed but on which a quantity of unburned logs remain. Another class is that of purely pastoral lands of so limited a capacity for stock-carrying that the expenditure that control would entail would be beyond the possible realization of revenue from such properties. Control is not reasonable under such conditions, nor is it attempted; yet those lands involve some of the gravest difficulties that attend the administration of the Noxious Weeds Act. Weeds from these districts where control is not attempted are distributed to other areas that may be comparatively free from infestation. This is a condition that no statute, however it may be administered, can modify. The Inspectors endeavour to induce those landowners that are in this unfortunate position to attempt some control. This is done with all discretion. Very often a useful control is effected and at no great expenditure of labour or money, for the conditions are different: the forest lands, specially those in process of clearing, are open to the reception of weed-seeds, whereas established pastures are by no means susceptible, and on farms cultivation disposes of the greater proportion of such weeds. This refers more directly to blackberry and ragweed than to the Canadian thistle: these lands present great difficulties. It would appear that there is but a palliation; the greatest discretion in dealing with such lands is demanded of the Department of Agriculture. Fortunately there remain many districts practically clear of serious weeds that are not menaced by contiguous infested areas; it is here that the landowners desire direct and efficient control, and the statute and Inspectors are supported.

2. Can efficiency be increased? It is difficult to realize in what direction this may be secured; it certainly cannot be obtained without recourse to legal procedure, and to this irritation would be strongly manifested. The only possible warrant for such action on the part of the Department would be the mandate of the farmers of a district, and that is not probable.

3. Is the statute administered with discretion? The addresses of the various speakers at the Council and at other meetings made no reference to harshness of administration; the delegates of at least two districts supported the work of the officers of the Department.

4. Which weeds should be more specially controlled? On forest and pastoral lands where the infestation is but commencing and some control possible, blackberry and ragweed; on established pasturage and farms, the same weeds, with some attention to Canadian thistle.

5. Control on Crown and Native lands: The effective control of weeds on these lands would require a greater expenditure than the whole of the revenue of the Dominion would supply. A certain control is in operation; it is that there is an allocation of money in the hands of the Commissioners of Crown Lands, which is expended by them on the representation of the local Inspector of Noxious Weeds. These recommendations refer generally to such areas as affect adjoining occupied lands. Let it be remembered that to a great extent remaining Crown lands are those that from quality of soil or from natural features are not attractive for settlement, and for this reason do not warrant great expenditure. There are also many reserves for different purposes that come under the same method of control. These reserves are the cause of considerable annoyance. They often come into close proximity to settlement; there is a menace