

NELSON.

(H. D. McKELLAR, Commissioner of Crown Lands.)

The position with regard to a number of soldier settlers is somewhat precarious, and it will require great determination on their part and sympathetic treatment by the Department to avoid failure. The great majority will, however, surmount the difficulties now being experienced and become successful farmers. The embarrassing condition in which many find themselves is due primarily to the low prices obtainable for farm produce and stock.

It was ascertained early in the year that a number of settlers did not realize their responsibilities with regard to payment of rent and interest, and with regard to the disposal of stock and chattels held under bill of sale. No effort has been spared to make the matter clear, and a better understanding of the position is now manifested. It had to be repeatedly explained that the claims of second mortgagees were not to be satisfied while payments were due to the Crown as first mortgagee.

Partnerships in farms have proved most disappointing both to the partners and the Department. Out of about a score only about half a dozen still exist in the whole district.

With the object of inducing settlers to continue in occupation of their farms they have been advised not to lose heart and give up, as with better prices for produce, determination to succeed, and lenient treatment by the Department they will win through ultimately. Altogether about twenty settlers have abandoned their holdings, and realization has had to be decided upon.

Generally speaking, the soldier settler is showing an admirable spirit notwithstanding the difficulties he has to contend with, which are greater than those of the experienced farmer who has had the benefit of the high prices obtained during the war.

WESTLAND.

(R. S. GALBRAITH, Commissioner of Crown Lands.)

No land has been acquired under the Land for Settlements Act in this district for discharged soldiers, and transactions have consequently been confined to advances under section 2 of the Discharged Soldiers Settlement Amendment Act, 1917, for the purchase of farms and dwellings and for stock, chattels, and improvements.

The advances made during the past year have been almost entirely on current account for improvements and stock.

The individual holdings thus financed are generally scattered widely throughout the district, and are held on various tenures, and there are no groups sufficiently compact or important to be classed as soldier settlements.

There were on our books at 31st March 164 soldiers, 86 of whom have been financed in connection with farms, stock, &c.; 56 who have received advances in connection with dwellings, and 12 who selected land but have so far not applied for financial assistance.

Practically all these men have been settled during the last three years, and many have been in occupation for a much shorter time, consequently the sudden drop in prices of all farm-produce and the general financial stringency has been a hard blow to them, and many have found it impossible to meet their obligations.

The fall in the price of stock which commenced last year continued to such an extent that little or no profit was left for the grower, and the low price obtained for butterfat this season has been a specially severe set-back to the soldier settlers, few of whom have had their farms long enough to afford the loss.

There are indications, however, that prices are likely to improve, and given anything like normal conditions I consider that nearly all should make good in the end, though meanwhile it will probably be necessary to give a good many further concessions by way of postponements, remissions, &c., to enable them to carry on.

CANTERBURY.

(G. H. BULLARD, Commissioner of Crown Lands.)

Owing to the partial cessation of advances the settlement of discharged soldiers has lessened very much in comparison with previous years. During the past year advances have been confined mainly to stock advances and purchase of small holdings or dwellings for T.B. or badly disabled men.

No estates were acquired during the year. Some small allotments in Heihei and Moreton Settlements are still unselected.

Many of the soldiers on pastoral or grazing country are hampered by the deficit in their trading accounts, caused by the fall in the price of stock, especially where they are being pressed by the stock and agency companies to reduce their debit balances; and this has made it more difficult for many of them to meet their payments of interest and rent. The Board has recommended the granting of such postponements of rent and interest as seemed desirable, but in a few cases has had to intimate to other creditors that the Government must get something, and not allow others to collect everything. The Board is taking a fair attitude and working reasonably with the commercial institutions, which in this district have apparently made stock advances to a greater extent than elsewhere. In land under tillage some of the men have been much hampered by having to work their land under cultivation free of twitch-grasses which seem to revel in some of the stiffer clay soils of this district; in a few cases Californian thistle is also giving trouble. These conditions necessitate the keeping a fairly large and strong team, which is a big tax on any but fairly large holdings.

As was to be expected, some soldiers, on account of inexperience or want of energy or lack of capital, have had to come out of their farms; and a rather regrettable feature is the number of partnerships that have had to be dissolved owing to disagreement between the partners.