

AUCKLAND.

(K. M. GRAHAM, Commissioner of Crown Lands.)

A general review of the farming industry in the Auckland Land District for the year ending 31st March shows that, on the whole, the farming community has experienced what might be termed a fair average year. Despite the adverse effects of the drought conditions which prevailed during the middle period of the season, the returns to date are sufficient to conclusively indicate that with normal rainfall and favourable climatic conditions the season's production would have been the best ever experienced in this district. The winter was exceptionally mild and free from repeated heavy frosts, and with top-dressed pastures in good heart and the dairy herds in good condition the season commenced with excellent prospects of success. Unfortunately, these prospects were in a great measure shattered over a wide area by the severe drought which commenced in November and continued on almost without even a passing shower till well into the month of February. Since then a more or less normal rainfall has done much to retrieve the situation and renew the growth of dried-up pastures, and the present weather conditions appear favourable for a good autumn and a substantial recovery of both pastures and winter crops.

Sheep-farming.—A number of the larger dairy-factory suppliers of last year have turned over to sheep-farming, and they have no cause for complaints, as all sheep-farmers throughout the district have had a very successful season. The long spell of warm dry weather suited this class of farming, and prices for all classes of sheep were well maintained. The wool-clip showed a marked increase over that of last year, and the result of the wool-sales was most satisfactory from the growers' viewpoint.

Dairy-farming.—That last season's output constituted a record and the total production in terms of butterfat at the end of March of this year exceeded this by 2·3 per cent., in spite of four months with practically no rainfall, is an indication of what might have been had the weather conditions been favourable to dairying throughout the mid-summer period. Though a slowing-down in production was apparent in October, the total production by the end of the calendar year was still substantially in excess, both in quantity and value, of that of the previous season; but January was very dry, and an alarming decrease in output took place, though this varied to a marked extent according to the type of land and nature of the soil, the light Waikato lands being, for instance, greatly affected, and in quite a number of cases early inroads had to be made into winter feed in order to keep the cows going. The dry spell, on the other hand, suited the heavier lands, and much of the Hauraki Plains and Rangitaiki district have received great benefit as a result, though crops in some parts of the district have been rather light. The hay harvest has come up to expectations, and the dry weather was most opportune where crops were good—the hay was harvested in excellent condition, and there have been no losses through spontaneous combustion in stacks, as was the case last year. The success attained in growing hay and in dairying generally throughout the district can, broadly speaking, be ascribed in a large measure to the use of fertilizers in the form of top-dressing, the absolute necessity of which is being demonstrated on every side of farming more and more as each year passes. A noteworthy increase in herd-testing has taken place during the year, and the settlers generally appear to realize the many benefits that accrue through systematic testing and culling. Though there has been a large increase this year in the number of pigs that have been bred for the bacon trade, prices have been disappointing so far, and expected profits have not been realized. Any well-organized and concerted movement to put this branch of the industry on a better and more stable footing will greatly benefit the individual settler and enable him to take his share in this as an essential sideline to dairying.

In spite of modern traction, the horse still maintains his place on the farm, and there is a steady demand for good farm horses at well-maintained prices.

There are indications of a good autumn, and as the stocks of both cheese and butter held in store are much lighter than at the same time last year a stimulation of both demand and values may be the result, and may operate to offset in some measure the disappointment occasioned by the partial failure of the prospects, which were so phenomenally bright at the commencement of the season.

Deteriorated Lands.—The Deteriorated Lands Committee, which was set up in this district under the provisions of the Deteriorated Lands Act, 1925, completed its work during the year. Altogether 453 applications for revaluation, relief, and assistance, from both Crown settlers and freeholders, were received and dealt with, and, in addition to wholesale reductions in capital values and writing-off of arrears, long-term remissions of rent have in many cases been granted, on the condition that improvements to the holdings are effected each year to the value of the sum remitted as rent. In addition to the granting of these concessions, the Department has in certain cases been successful in prevailing upon private mortgagees to reduce their mortgage charges and grant remissions of interest for a period, and advances for fencing and manures have been authorized by the Minister to the amount of £11,850. The immediate effect has been to lift the settlers affected out of the hitherto hopeless state into which they had drifted owing to the depletion of the natural resources of the soil through constant stocking over a long period of years and the steady reversion of the hill country to noxious and secondary growth. Settlers who had intended to abandon their holdings have now been given a chance to see daylight ahead, and have decided to stay on and endeavour to overcome their difficulties. Here and there boundaries have been extended by taking up adjoining areas, and as a whole there is a regaining of confidence in the future such as could not exist before the passing of the Act. Where top-dressing of our bush and pastoral country has been carried out it has been shown that the better grasses come back, the quality of all classes of stock is improved, and the carrying-capacity of the land is considerably increased. The steady improvement that has taken place in beef values since the period of low prices last autumn should directly encourage settlers whose accounts have been readjusted to commence top-dressing, even in localities where it has up to the present not been economically possible.