

OTAGO.

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

The year which ended on 31st March last was quite a good one for the great majority of farmers and pastoralists in Otago. In the far-inland portions of the district around the lakes an unusually dry summer and autumn were experienced, and settlers there suffered accordingly. Over the remainder of the province the climatic conditions were good. The first two months of the year were mild and warm, but were followed by rain and frosts until November. Thereafter good conditions prevailed. There were several falls of snow on the high lands in the spring, but none was severe, and stock-losses therefrom were not serious. The weather conditions in the late winter and early spring considerably hampered ploughing and sowing operations, with the result that the area sown in oats and wheat was rather less than usual. It is pleasing to note that the holders of pasture-land, in South Otago particularly, have gone in to an increased extent for top-dressing, and that the results have more than justified the experiment.

The sheep-farmers have had a particularly good year. At the first wool-sale of the season prices opened at a decided advance on last year's, and showed a progressive advance at the following sales. The quantity of wool produced was greater and the quality probably better than for many years past. In Central Otago, where the bulk of the pastoral country is, a gradual change for the better is taking place. The destructive work wrought in the past by the rabbit and the indiscriminate use of the fire-stick appears to have ended. Rabbits are not numerous now, and the sunny hill-faces which used to swarm with them are quite clear of the pest. The very high prices for winter skins, the diminution in number, and the increasing scarcity of the natural enemies' food-supply are all contributing to the extermination of the little animal which has nearly ruined so much valuable grazing-country. Burning of tussock is now being carried out in a proper manner at the proper season. It would be interesting to know by how many sheep the flocks of Central Otago have increased in, say, the last five years, and by how much per sheep the average weight of wool has gone up. Irrigation, with what it brings, has, of course, been an important factor in the increase. The inevitable tendency which I mentioned with regret in previous annual reports has again manifested itself—the tendency to trade in pastoral properties at prices based on present-day producing-values. Such a practice must assuredly spell ruin to the unfortunate one with limited capital who finds himself in possession when heavily-reduced produce-prices come along. The most difficult work the Land Board is called upon to do is the adjudication in cases of applications to transfer pastoral and small grazing-runs. The task is not made easier by the rule the selling agents have adopted—the bolstering-up of the values of stock, chattels, and improvements, and the keeping-down of the portion of the purchase-money which represents the goodwill of the lease. Cases have occurred in which the agent's and vendor's valuations of the improvements have been double those of the Department's field officers.

The dairy-farmers have had a fairly prosperous year, and it is anticipated that the price per pound for butterfat will prove about 1½d. better than last year's. Increased yields have been secured, largely through the instrumentality of top-dressing and herd-testing.

The orchardists have not had a good year. The yields, especially of stone fruit, were very good, but weather conditions produced such a rush of ripening fruit at one time that the market became glutted and prices fell to a level that was quite unpayable to the grower.

The area of land offered for sale or selection under all headings during the year was 5,594 acres, this being a considerable shrinkage of the area offered in the previous year. The number of selectors on the books at 31st March was 5,536, this being an increase of eighty-five over the figures for the previous year. The area held, however, showed a decrease of 5,000 acres, but the annual rental payable increased by £1,790. The renewing of expiring leases formed an important part of the year's operations, the area involved being 165,725 acres. The annual rental payable under the new leases shows an increase of £910 over the sum payable on the expiring leases. The freeholds acquired during the year were not numerous, only eighteen tenants availing themselves of the option to convert their leaseholds. The total revenue for the year was £269,013, including £95,097 derived from discharged soldier settlers, while the arrears showed a decrease of £3,016, although the number of tenants in arrear was slightly greater. Twelve ordinary and two special meetings of the Land Board were held during the year, the volume of business transacted being above the average, there being nearly three hundred cases of transfer and sublease.

SOUTHLAND.

(N. C. KENSINGTON, Commissioner of Crown Lands.)

The conditions generally have, on the whole, been satisfactory from a farming point of view during the past year. Although a cold winter was experienced, the conditions were dry, and good lambing percentages were reported from pastoralists. Unfortunately, there was a very late spring, and little growth till the end of October. The result was that the dairy-farmer did not reach the full flush of the season till December. Following on the late spring, a dry spell ensued from early in January till March, consequently the returns from dairy herds suffered as a result of the combination. The price obtained for butterfat by those settlers supplying cheese-factories promises a successful season; but, unfortunately, the supplier to the butter-factory will not, it seems, obtain such a good price.