

(No. 65.)—The Hon. Mr. VOGEL to the CHAIRMAN, Flax Commission.

I beg to report the result of inquiries made in the United States respecting New Zealand flax, or *Phormium tenax* fibre. The inquiries have been made during the intervals, necessarily not long, which could be spared from the main object of my visit to this country, namely, the settlement of the terms of the mail contract. It is therefore not to be supposed that I am able to give anything like an exhaustive report upon the uses to which the *Phormium tenax* fibre is put, and the estimation in which it is held in America. The report must rather be regarded as a summary of information gained, and not at all as approaching a full report on the subject. I may add, that for most of the information gained I am indebted to the assiduity and industry of Mr. Fox.

In California, as far as I was able to judge, the flax seemed to be scarcely at all known. There as well as elsewhere it was found to be a difficulty that samples could not be shown, except those prepared by the Natives, which were supplied to me through the Native Department.

In Chicago, nothing relating to the subject could be ascertained, but one gentleman expressed to me the conviction that, if the material to be dealt with could be shown, there were machinists who could supply machines to do with it whatever could be done by hand.

In New York the fibre is well known to ropemakers, dealers in flax, hemp, &c. Samples were frequently produced, but as a rule they were not good. The fibre has been generally imported from England, but some dealers spoke of direct importation as within their knowledge. As a rule, the New Zealand fibre is considered here not fit to compete with average Manilla; and samples of Sisal, of good quality, as well as various hemp, including some American grown, were during the inquiries shown by dealers as articles which would be preferred to the New Zealand flax for use with or as substitutes for Manilla.

The present sale price of Manilla is about 10 cents gold per lb. During the war, and even since its close, the price has ranged from 13 cents to 18 cents; but that average was spoken of as "altogether unhealthy," and as preventing a free use of the fibre. Some years before the war, Manilla fetched no more than 5 cents per lb., and an old practical ropemaker expressed the opinion that for a steady market the fibre ought to be little if at all above 6 cents per lb.

Reference to the price of Manilla was necessary, because every person who was consulted stated explicitly, or clearly implied, that that is the standard fibre for ropes, cords, &c., and that its price must rule the prices of any others introduced. At the same time, almost every person consulted spoke of the fluctuations in the price of Manilla.

One of the samples of New Zealand flax, prepared by Natives of the Wellington Province, was exhibited during the inquiries. Invariably, the fibre was most highly praised; and, without an exception, the reports declared that if such an article could be had in quantity, it would certainly realize, at any time, as much as good Manilla. Amongst the opinions expressed were, "It is the very best fibre I have ever seen;" "It ought, in time, to beat Manilla out of the market;" or "It should compete with the best selected Manilla." But, in the absence of enough of such fibre to test the market, no manufacturer or dealer would venture a more definite expression of opinion as to value than that before stated. The representative of one large manufacturing firm (Messrs. Tucker, Carter, and Co.) said that he was most anxious to see such a fibre imported—that it was just what was wanted in the market; but he also said that if a bale of it was shown, the probable conclusion would be that it was Sisal specially got up, and that nothing but having a number of bales of the fibre on hand would enable it to establish its position, and a reliable opinion as to value, &c., to be arrived at. The same gentleman said that he had heard of whale lines having formerly been made of "New Zealand hemp," but that, knowing the "hemp" only as it had been imported during the last two years, he had simply laughed at the idea. The sample shown to him would, he believed, be found to be excellently suited for whale lines and boat ropes—if the fibre would stand water. At the same warehouse, a bale of "New Zealand hemp" nearly as good as the sample, was spoken of as having been "shown" amongst the trade not many months ago; and though offered at 50s. a cwt., it was stated not to have been sold. Further information as to this bale could not be obtained. An excellent sample of Sisal was stated to be at present worth, in the market, 9c. (gold) per lb.; and that, it was added, would certainly be an "outside price" for any lot of ordinary "New Zealand hemp," such as had hitherto been imported.

All the opinions before referred to were based on the assumption that the fibre equal to the Native-prepared sample would be used only for rope and heavy cordage. But the sample was shown to a firm engaged in the manufacture of twines, cords, &c. (Messrs. Hart and Co.), and their opinion was that a moderate constant supply would sell readily, if it could be had for about 15 cents (currency) per lb.

The practical head of a rope-manufacturing establishment (Mr. Marshall, of L. Conterbury and Co.), which was stated to be about the largest in the United States, showed the utmost possible interest in the subject. After he had examined the sample, the same as shown in each case, he declared, "This would make the very best rope known." It would, he said, rank up to first-class Manilla, and he was sure that a responsible firm in New York could be easily found to contract to make one thousand tons yearly, if it could be put down in New York for 10c. (gold) per lb. A year ago, fibre equal to the sample, would have fetched 13c. (gold). The twisting of the fibre into slim-skeins was objected to as necessitating labour to undo the twisting. The form in which the fibre should be sent out was stated to be in what is called "handfuls," the end doubled so as to bale well and all the rest left loose. The price stated was conditional on the bulk being quite as good as the sample, and longer if possible. Machine-dressed New Zealand fibre (an average sample), was stated to be worth, in the New York mark, 8c. (currency) per lb., duty paid. The recent fall in the price of New Zealand fibre was mentioned; and the gentleman referred to said he knew enough of the English market to feel absolutely sure that that fall did not result from any operations or combination of large dealers in Manilla, but was the direct result of very much of what was shipped from the Colony being coarse and harsh and unclean—not at all fit to compete with Manilla. He expressed a strong hope that the Government would not for a moment entertain the idea that the reduced price resulted from anything but "natural causes." He also expressed a hope that ordinary discouragements would not check