

1883.
NEW ZEALAND.

THE RABBIT NUISANCE

(ANNUAL REPORT ON), BY THE SUPERINTENDING INSPECTOR.

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

Mr. B. P. BAYLY to the Hon. the COLONIAL SECRETARY.

SIR,—

Wellington, 31st July, 1883.

I have the honour to furnish my annual report on the steps taken for the extermination of rabbits, and the results obtained, during the period 1st July, 1882, to 30th June, 1883.

In September, 1882, the amended Rabbit Act came into operation. On the whole, this measure may be said to have been fairly successful. The reports from the different Inspectors, which are attached hereto, show that a more than perceptible diminution of the pest has been effected. As these reports give every detail, I shall confine myself to general remarks upon the whole question.

Although the present Act works fairly well, and good results have been obtained, yet, as contemplated, the great difficulty has been, and will still be found to exist, in dealing with the large areas of waste lands, together with the different reserves set aside for various purposes throughout the colony. Many of these might be temporarily disposed of for grazing purposes, on condition that the rabbits were destroyed during the time of tenure; and I am of opinion that, where possible, these areas should be alienated from the ownership of the Crown for the time being, as a few years' cost of rabbit destruction upon these blocks will amount to more than their value, and, under existing circumstances, this may be looked upon as an annual tax.

Where such inaccessible areas exist, as in portions of Otago, I see but one solution, and that is the introduction of the natural enemy. Rabbits are now well established throughout the western ranges, where to deal with them by ordinary means is simply impossible, and these act as a dépôt for restocking adjacent country.

Inquiries tend to show that the stoat and weasel, if they can possibly be imported, would be the best agents of destruction to turn out on these wastes. A good bonus has been offered to any one who will introduce a certain number of these animals in a healthy condition, and I am informed that one man has proceeded to England for the purpose of making an attempt.

The importation of ferrets (statement attached) has not been attended with the success that was anticipated, disease during the voyage having carried off, in many instances, the whole of a shipment. This makes the cost of those delivered reach a high average; and it becomes a question whether it would not be more economical to offer a certain sum, say 12s. per head, for all that could be bred in the colony; and, as a number of private individuals own ferrets simply for the purpose of selling the increase, others would, having a certain sum insured for what they could breed, take up the industry, and thus an inducement would be offered for breeding them, which does not exist at present.

It seems to be the general impression that the ferret is doing good work, and experience shows that they must be turned out in as large numbers as possible to be serviceable. When liberated only a few at a time, their numbers are not sufficient to cope with the increase of the rabbit; consequently the ground has to be hunted over, trapped, or other means of destruction adopted; while this is being carried out numbers of the ferrets and natural enemies must be destroyed; yet, with every exertion, some considerable time must elapse before their destroying power will be sufficiently increased to counterbalance the fecundity of the rabbit; and experience shows that considerable loss is sustained from disease and other causes after they have been turned out. To be thoroughly serviceable a hardier animal is required, especially for the colder portions of Otago.

With a view to distribute ferrets on Crown lands throughout the colony, breeding establishments have been formed at Waimata and Masterton, North Island, and at Christchurch, in the South Island; together with this a certain number have been distributed to private individuals whose properties are bordered by Crown lands or reserves. This has been done with a view to turn out the increase on such waste lands when sufficiently numerous, and it is proposed to continue and gradually extend this system. Those receiving them are held responsible for the number supplied, and are required to return either the original number or their value. In no case as yet have any been turned out on Crown lands by the department, the increase not being sufficiently numerous to allow it; but, at the same time, on private properties, notably in Marlborough, as many as five hundred have been bred by private owners and turned out on one station during the season.

As the ordinary means of destruction phosphorized grain is still acknowledged to be the cheapest and most efficacious method of dealing with the pest, especially on large areas. An endeavour has been made this season, where practicable, to introduce a block system to deal with the country in a face, as well as for the purpose of inducing combined action on the part of adjoining