

SESS. II.—1891.
NEW ZEALAND.

IMPORTATION OF SLEEPERS AND FOREIGN TIMBERS

(CORRESPONDENCE WITH RAILWAY COMMISSIONERS RELATING TO THE).

Return to an Order of the House of Representatives, dated the 25th August, 1891.

Ordered, "That the Railway Commissioners be requested to lay before this House any correspondence with them in relation to the importation of sleepers and foreign timbers."—(Mr. WILSON.)

No. 1.

The RAILWAY COMMISSIONERS to the Hon. the MINISTER for PUBLIC WORKS.

The Hon. the Minister for Public Works.

14th July, 1891.

WITH reference to your recent verbal communications on the subject of sleeper supplies, in which you informed me that members in the House of Representatives have taken exception, in the House, to the use of imported timber, and that you thought it desirable to have the Commissioners' views thereon, the Railway Commissioners have the honour to remark as follows :—

They understand that the desire is that the colonial products should be utilised to the fullest extent, so as to afford employment in such manner as to best serve the interests of the colony. The Commissioners desire to assure you that it is their earnest wish to assist in the development of internal industries of the colony to the fullest extent, compatible with the interests of the colony as a whole. From the narrower point of view of the interests of the railways, as a business concern, it is desirable to utilise local products and local labour, as such a practice tends directly and indirectly to promote traffic on the railways. The Commissioners apprehend that there can be no practical difference of opinion on this point.

It has been the practice, from the inception of railway construction, during the last twenty years to import a certain number of hardwood sleepers for special purposes. The Railway Commissioners have not taken any new departure in this respect, but they have diminished the numbers used of late years.

The Commissioners attach a summary for six years past of the returns laid before Parliament in the several annual reports showing the kind of sleepers laid by Working Railways Department in maintaining the lines each year.

The Railway Department has been using the local timbers during the past twenty years, and has therefore the best technical experience of their suitability for sleepers and other railway purposes. The rails are laid on the New Zealand railways, as is well known, without chairs. The softer New Zealand timbers, under these conditions, are economical, and available only where the wear and strains are light, and they do not commend themselves for safety or economy in many positions. Where heavy wheel loads, very sharp curves, steep gradients, and important structures occur it becomes desirable to secure the very best means at command to maintain safe and efficient roads. The birch sleeper is very largely used, but is not economical or reliable in all positions. The puriri is also largely used, and will be more so as supplies are available. This timber, however, is supplied only in the adzed form, and is not adapted for all purposes.

There is no New Zealand timber in the market which can equal the hardwoods of Australia for the combined advantages of strength, hardness, durability, and economy. The quantities now required are relatively unimportant, and will not average more than 5 or 6 per cent. of the annual supplies needed. The expenditure of £1,500 or £2,000 on hardwood sleepers (out of a total of £700,000 a year, which it costs to work the railways) to make our railway transit as safe and secure as we can reasonably manage to do, is scarcely a transaction which can be deemed to prejudicially affect the colonial progress. Such an outlay, at the best, will not affect more than fifteen or twenty people, while the proper conduct of the railway-traffic affects the whole colony. A bad accident, arising from neglecting to secure the best road, which we reasonably can do, may cost the colony as much as would pay for all the hardwood sleepers the railway would require for the next fifty years.