

16. Where would you commence?—I should imagine that it would go to Turangarere.

17. *Mr. C. H. Mills.*] Is the Wanganui River suitable for navigation?—No; only as far as Pipiriki.

18. *The Chairman.*] Do you wish to make any other statement?—I could give you my opinions, but they are not really evidence.

The Hon. Mr. RICHARDSON, sworn and examined.

19. *The Chairman.*] You are member for Mataura?—Yes.

20. The Committee wish to have what information you can give them as to the suitability of the country along the rival routes for settlement, and generally your view of the utility of what is known as the central line?—The land along the central route varies from good to fair settlement-land up to Turangarere. Some of it is very good. You then get into the pumice belt, but not very far from the edge of it. The greater portion of the Waimarino Block, which would be opened by this line, is, however, good to fair settlement land.

21. The greater portion of the block?—Yes; the greater portion of the Waimarino Block.

22. The greater portion of the block lies a considerable distance from the line. What is the character of the soil immediately along the line?—You may say that the line, after you enter the bush from Kerioi is clear of the pumice belt, with the exception of the Waimarino Plain, where the pumice belt extends to the westward of the line for some short distance. After entering the bush again, going to Taumarunui from the Waimarino Plain, you are practically outside the belt of pumice. From Taumarunui to Te Kuiti almost the entire distance is over pumice country—that is to say, that all the flats and terrace lands consist of greater or less depths of pumice. The sharp hills covering, perhaps, a third of the area, are mostly free from pumice, and are good land.

23. That part of the country is common to both routes?—No. Well, a great part of it is.

24. The greater part of it is?—Yes, the greater part of it is. From Taumarunui to Te Kuiti, or thereabout, there is good country westward of the line, and I should think probably from ten to twelve miles away from it. There is none near the line. From ten to twelve miles away you get into the limestone country of the Upper Mokau. Taking the Stratford route, you would have to go through some miles of this poor country before you reach land suitable for settlement.

25. Have you been over the Stratford route?—Not through. I have been up from Stratford a certain distance—as far as the Government were then carrying on road-construction; and from what I saw, and could see ahead, it appeared to me—in fact I have no doubt—that the whole of the land along that route, until you reach pumice, which would probably be within ten miles of the central line, is all more or less suitable for settlement, that is from good to fair. It is largely broken country.

26. And country at a low elevation?—All low enough for settlement. As a rule, throughout the whole of that central district, when you reach an elevation of about between 1,500ft. and 2,000ft., even though the land is covered with bush, the character of the land is inferior. It turns largely into birch, and will at best be only second-class land. I may add that even the pumice country I have spoken of seems capable of some improvement. The surface-sown English grass appears to take fairly well, and the Natives succeed in getting reasonable crops from small cultivations.

27. What class of crops?—Well, all I know of, I think, are potatoes. I think they make a clearing, and use the ground for one or two seasons, and then make a fresh clearing. I think the whole of this pumice country is capable of occupation, but probably for many years will only be developed into what you might call healthy but poor pastoral land.

28. Do you think the soil is strong enough to hold the grass—that the sheep would not pull it out by the roots?—Most of the country is covered with snow-grass tussock, with silver tussock, and with a little blue tussock mixed; and English grass takes, not in the same sense that we speak of low-lying bush land; but the natural grasses seem to me to be capable of considerable improvement by surface sowing. The winters are long on this high inland plateau, and the frost severe. In the end of November there was more than $\frac{1}{2}$ in. of ice in the morning on the top of a bucket of water we had outside the hut in the Waimarino; but I do not think that any of the land can be considered to be valueless, or classed as barren.

29. On the other hand, you would scarcely rank it as land attractive to settlers?—No; I am now speaking of the inferior pumice country—land in the pumice district. The pumice districts of the interior seem to vary—that the pumice land near and about the line of central route, near the mountains, seems to me, for some reason, to be very superior as pumice land to, say, the Kaiangaroa Plain, between Galatea and Rotorua, and for a considerable distance between Rotorua and Taupo. All these pumice lands are of an inferior character to that adjacent to the North Island Main Trunk line. [Witness refers to the map, and explains to the Committee why the line diverges so much to the eastward—about ninety-five miles.] That it is the commencement of the fall down to the Wanganui River at Taumarunui. You are then leaving the plateau and descending into the valley of the Wanganui. In the same way, at Ohakune, the land lies pretty nearly level for the first twelve miles, and in the last ten miles you have the whole drop of about 1,500ft.

30. Inasmuch as we are given to understand that the good land in the Waimarino Block lies in the western part of it, would it be possible to make a divergence with the railway to the westward, instead of eastward, and in that case would it not run through better country?—It would, no doubt. The more you go to westward the further you get away from the heavy pumice deposit; and I am satisfied, from what I saw, that the line as laid out from, I think I may say, Ohakune to Taumarunui, must be further explored. There is plenty of distance to obtain good easy grades, but the way they have gone now they have nothing to hang the line upon, and the consequence is that they have adopted rather steep grades. I believe that with further exploration it would be quite possible to get a much better route. The two worst points of the line are the viaducts between Ohakune and the Waimarino Plain.