

In this report it is of no use to shirk or pass lightly over grave wrong, for those who know me best are well aware of my predilection for plain speaking, whenever such is necessary. Therefore, I make no further apology for using strong condemnatory language in dealing with the fire question in the kauri districts of the North Island. Here the gum-digger is permitted to roam at will under cover of a license. This engaging person, strong in possession of his right and his vote, is permitted to light fires at his own discretion at such times and in such places as he may choose. If he sets fire to a kauri forest, including timber to the value of £20,000 or £100,000, and is found out and fined a paltry £1 or £1 10s., he thinks himself an injured individual.

At the recent Conference it was a generally expressed opinion that the kauri is doomed, its anticipated extinction being ascribed principally to fire. Here, then, we have an industry which in the case of a single company employs over two thousand men, whose wages-sheet amounts annually to £150,000, threatened with extinction, since it is solemnly announced at a Conference that there is no hope of its continuance, because the kauri forest is doomed, through gross carelessness and the fires of the gum-digger and others.

It seems to be universally conceded that the gum-digger is responsible for two-thirds of the fires which occur in this district. A shameful state of things in a climate like that of New Zealand, where for only perhaps three months in the year is the forest inflammable, that a great national industry in the chief product of the Island is to be absolutely ruined in the course of from thirty to fifty years, because the Governments are afraid to grasp the nettle of regulations for the gentleman armed with the gum-spear, lest this mild mannered selfish gum-seeker should be hampered with—to him—irksome conditions. A grand industry, forsooth, is to be absolutely smothered and rooted out, so that he may live unfettered and untrammelled by the laws of the land. Although, however, the gum-digger is justly credited with being fire-raiser in chief, others come a good second, both sheep-farmer and pastoralist adding their spokes to the wheel of destruction.

Now, for the remedy. Briefly this: Let the Legislature of the colony pass a stringent Act making the clauses relating to fire penal. Proclaim the best timber lands as State forests, and make these permanent, placing every impediment possible in the way of their alienation once so proclaimed. Appoint foresters, with forest firemen under them, in charge of the more valuable forests.

1. In the Fire Act proclaim fire districts, and enact that no fire shall be lighted in any State forests or on other Crown lands during the months of December, January, or February in the open air. Fires should only be allowed within houses, huts, or tents, or in the case of the latter only in fireplaces approved by the Forest Inspector in charge of the district—either a deep hole, or ground enclosed by stone, clay, sod, or any other material except wood.

2. It should be an offence punishable by imprisonment to set fire to any green tree or log, standing or fallen tree, or stump *in situ*, dead or alive; also for any person having lighted a fire in the open to have left the same unextinguished, or permitted it to spread and ignite the bush.

3. The use of any other matches than "Patent safety," or of any inflammable material for gunwads or other purposes, should be absolutely prohibited under heavy penalties.

4. Smoking in the forest whilst at work, or during working-hours, by sawmill employé\*, gum-diggers, sleeper-hewers, &c., should also be prohibited.

5. Substantial rewards should be offered for information leading to conviction for breaches of these regulations.

6. Licensees convicted of malicious offence or gross carelessness to forfeit their licenses and be refused renewal for all time.

7. Gumdiggers' licenses should only be issued for a limited period, and for certain specific places or districts.

During the summer months above specified (especially in the kauri districts) extra temporary assistance should be allowed the officer in charge, and in the more valuable forests these officers should have men put on to clear and burn off fire-breaks in such places as the proximity of settlement made causes of anxiety.

The kauri-gum digger might also be dealt with by closing such fire districts as might be from time to time proclaimed against his entry during the summer months, or by limiting his operations to certain specified portions of the forest. The provisions suggested as clause 2 might stand good for the whole year, varied only under special permit of the officer in charge, in order to allow necessary clearing for building, cultivation, or other purposes formally approved by him.

Every gum-digger should register with the local forest officer his license, name, and occupation, and should be allotted a specified camping-place within the State forest. He should not be allowed to move his camp to another place, either within the forest or outside of it, except under direction of the officer, whose duty it would be to see also that the camp regulations are carried out.

A fine of £5 should be imposed for breaches of clauses 3 and 4. Fine and imprisonment should be imposed for infringement of clause 2.

It will be urged, no doubt, that these suggested regulations would be too stringent. It will be no use, however, to tinker with so important a subject by mild legislation. The case is desperate, and therefore drastic measures are the only effective remedies.

In case of fire, the forest officer should be empowered to call, in the name of the Queen, upon all sawmill employé, gum-diggers, and other residents holding licenses to assist in subduing it, refusal, except with valid excuse, to be punishable before the nearest Magistrate by fine, withdrawal of license, or both.

In the case of pastoral tenants, cancellation of lease and heavy fines should be inflicted for the burning of mountain-tops or bushes, and, with this in view, all pastoral lands should be proclaimed fire districts.

Shepherds found raising fires should be prosecuted *ipso facto*, and be fined not less than £10 for first and £20 for each subsequent offence.

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\* Except at stated times and under supervision of responsible foremen.