

SATURDAY, 3RD MARCH, 1900.

EDMUND CLIFTON, sworn.

438. *Mr. Cooper.*] Do you know anything of the fires in the wattle plantation at Wairangi?—I know nothing of the origin of the fire.

439. You know Mr. Young's plantation that was partly destroyed?—I know his plantation generally.

440. Can you speak to the value specifically of the plantation, and the damage?—I cannot speak specifically to any part or to value.

441. Can you give us general evidence as to the value of the wattle plantation?—I am only the supervisor of the Government wattle plantation.

442. When do the trees become productive? You have to strip them once and then they are done?—Yes, strip them once and then they are done. It takes nine years before they are matured for stripping.

443. Can you say what the return would be for a well-planted acreage per acre?—The averages are rather wide. They will vary from 2 tons to 4 tons of dry bark to the acre. I think one might fairly put it at 2 tons of dry bark. I make the difference between dry and the other because there is a shrinkage of between 50 and 60 per cent.

444. What was the value of the dry bark in 1896?—In 1896 it was sold in the bundle—that is, the rough bark. It was dry and ready for grinding. The value would be about £5 to £5 10s. a ton.

445. What would be the net return per ton? There is the cost of stripping, is there not?—That is the price in Auckland. I might, indeed, say it is £5 15s.

446. That would be the gross return?—Yes.

447. What would be the net return?—I average it at about 50 per cent. as the cost of production. That is rough, of course. In that I am including the cost of putting it in, the attendance on it in its growth, and so on.

448. It is like waiting ten years for a crop, is it not?—Yes.

449. It never grows a second time?—Yes. That particular crop does not, but it has seeded for the second time.

450. But the tree does not grow?—No, the tree is done when you have stripped its bark.

451. You think a fair deduction would be 50 per cent. from £5 15s.?—Yes.

452. That is all you can say?—I think so.

453. *Mr. Oliphant.*] I suppose, if a plantation is in its prime, as a great deal of this was when destroyed by fire, it will be very valuable? What would you estimate the production of a plantation of that kind?—I said it would be from 2 tons to 4 tons. There is such a wide margin that it will actually run from under 2 tons to over 4 tons.

454. I think Mr. Young said the price per acre was £6?—Well, I am speaking of a definite area in a definite condition. I am speaking of the unground article.

455. You were then living in Auckland?—I live in Auckland.

456. Were you frequently in Auckland at the time?—Yes. This plantation has been under my supervision since 1894.

457. Have you had any difficulty in the matter of fires from railway-engines?—We have had no fires on the Government plantation from the engines. I should qualify that by saying I put in a certain length of fire-breaks to prevent anything of the sort.

458. How frequently do these fire-breaks check a fire?—The position of a fire-break is this: It is in the nature of a protection to the plantation, so that, having this fire-break to start on, wherever one sees danger a small fire is put in on the side nearest the part likely to take fire, to prevent a bigger or unexpected one spreading.

459. You burn the growth next the railway?—It might be next the swamp, or perhaps next the part where you might anticipate a fire.

460. Were you not troubled with fires before that?—I do not think so; I cannot speak of one.

461. Were you there at the time of the big fire on the 15th December, 1896?—I was in Auckland.

462. Had you been made aware of the fact that a fire had occurred on the same day on the Government plantation?—I could not speak of that.

463. You would have no record of such a fire?—No, I have no record.

464. You did not hear the men say they had a fire on that date?—No; they did not speak of it. A man is resident there in charge of the plantation who would probably know.

465. It would be Mr. Kensington's duty to report fires?—Yes, if it was a fire of any extent. If it was a fire that had done damage he would have reported it.

466. At any rate, your experience of the management of the plantation is that it is necessary to have fire-breaks as against the engines?—The greater length of the fire-breaks is not on the railway-line at all.

467. It is between the railway-line and the plantation, is it not?—Part of the way only.

468. And it is to prevent the sparks setting the trees on fire?—No. The idea is to have protection against fires generally, and to confine such a fire if it took place.

469. On the railway?—The railway is only part of it; in fact, I anticipate quite as much danger from the dry swamps in the vicinity of the plantation as from the railway.

470. You only go there and come back the same day, do you?—I am generally there the greater part of a day, and then return to Auckland.

471. Has there never been any fire whilst you were there?—I cannot speak of it.

472. I suppose Mr. Kensington will say that?—He is resident there.