

554. I suppose you have given the question of fires considerable attention?—Yes.
555. Have you any suggestion to make as to what would lessen these fires? Do you think if the growth on the chain width at the side of the railway was kept down it would minimise the fires?—I could not say if it would.
556. I suppose the danger of throwing ashes from the engine must be very great?—It all depends on where the ashes go. Of course, if ashes land among some inflammable stuff a fire will start.
557. You have had to erect a considerable number of fire-breaks on your plantation, have you not?—Yes; we have had breaks round portions of sections to guard against any fire. We burn off ourselves, and we have to prevent our fires from spreading where they are not wanted.
558. You have fire-belts as against the railway, too?—Well, we have certainly cleared away, but it is more for the look of it than for anything else.
559. A good deal has been said about the Glasgow people not making fire-breaks: is it not the fact that their plantation does not come near the railway at any point?—That is so: it does not come near the railway.
560. How far distant is it?—I suppose it is about 40 chains.
561. And much of the boundary is impassable swamp, is it not?—You can walk across the big swamp anywhere now. I have seen cattle on it.
562. Did the cattle get across it?—I could not say that, but a man could walk across it.
563. Mr. Clifton, your superior officer, said the bark was sold at from £5 to £5 15s. a ton: would that afford a large number of men to make fire-breaks? Could private enterprise afford such an expenditure as that?—It depends on circumstances—how it is put in, and so on. Sometimes the trees are put in cheaper than at other times.
564. How many men have you employed at your plantation?—Sometimes five or six, or perhaps seven. The number varies.
565. How many have you in the off season?—If the mill is working we employ five or six. The mill takes two extra hands, and sometimes one extra.
566. *Mr. Cooper.*] In the class of country from Mercer to Rangiriri are there not continuous fires in the dry season apart from the railway?—Yes.
567. Incited by various things—people burning off, men throwing lighted matches on the ground, gum-diggers, and other causes? It is very inflammable country, is it not?—Yes.
568. Under those circumstances, would it not have been a proper precaution for the Glasgow people to take to provide fire-breaks?—The Government people have done so, but we are told the Glasgow people have provided no fire-breaks at all against the danger of fire from any cause. Would it not have been a proper precaution?—Decidedly it would be a precaution against fire, but whether it would pay I do not know.
569. On that stretch of line between Whangamarino and Rangiriri you say there were often Maoris who trespassed by travelling up and down the line?—I was speaking of through the plantation.
570. Well, on the stretch of line through the plantation?—Yes.
571. You have seen them going up and down the line?—Yes.
572. And we have evidence that there were Maori gum-diggers about in 1896?—Yes, there were.
573. Their custom is to hook the gum out of the swamps?—Yes.
574. And they sometimes fire the swamps for that purpose?—Yes.
575. So that it is impossible for you to say whether or not this fire was caused by a spark from an engine, or from Maori gum-diggers, or from a casual smoker who might have been trespassing on the line?—I could not say, because I did not see the fire originate.
576. And you cannot give any opinion about other fires concerning which you have been questioned?—I could give no positive opinion, because I did not see them.

FRANCIS FOSTER, sworn.

577. *Mr. Oliphant.*] What are you, Mr. Foster?—I am a farmer at Rangiriri.
578. How long have you resided there?—About sixteen years.
579. You were for some time with Mr. Potter, farmer, at Rangiriri?—Yes, for two years.
580. I believe the railway runs through his farm?—Yes.
581. Have you seen firemen throwing ashes from their trains in passing?—Yes.
582. Fires are very frequent in your district, are they not?—Yes, I have seen a good many fires.
583. Do you trace them to the railway?—I could not say that.
584. Not always to the railway?—I could not say how they originated, but I have seen fires.
585. In the two years you were with Mr. Potter you could trace them to the railway, could you not?—Yes; I did not see them start, but I have seen them on the railway-banks. They apparently started from the railway.
586. They were frequent?—Yes, there were several fires.
587. In the dry weather?—Yes.
588. There was a large fire on Saturday, was there not?—Yes. It was in the Whangamarino Swamp.
589. Where did it commence?—I saw where it commenced.
590. You knew the direction of the wind and so forth: have you any doubt that the fire of Saturday arose alongside the railway-track?—It has burnt right up to the ballasting and through the swamp and into some grass. It has burnt as far up to the railway as possible. It has burnt right up to the gravel, and has cleared away all it could.
591. A good deal has been said about Maori gum-diggers setting fire to the district. What do you say to that?—I have never seen a Maori raise a fire. I employ Maori labour myself, and