

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

BLUFF, FRIDAY, 27TH SEPTEMBER, 1912.

ARTHUR WILLIAM TRAILL, of Half-moon Bay.

Gentlemen,—I would like to mention that I am a resident of nearly forty years' duration in Stewart Island. When a young man I went in for fishing and oystering for several years, and although I have no interest in fishing personally and have no pecuniary stake in the fishery the fishermen asked me to act as their representative, knowing that I take a keen interest in the welfare of the island generally, so I wish to put their case before you for your due consideration. I was in Invercargill about six months ago when the regulations altering the minimum of blue-cod from 8 oz. to 16 oz. were announced in the paper. As soon as I saw this announcement I said, "This is a terrible blow to the fishermen." I went up the street and I met a gentleman, a fish-merchant, and I said to him, "What do you think of this?" and he said, "This is a terrible blow to the fishermen. It is too drastic altogether. I would not have minded 10 oz. to 12 oz., but 16 oz. is too much"; and that is exactly my opinion, and my opinion has never changed during the months since. I would like to draw your attention to the conditions under which the fish are caught at Stewart Island, and I would like to describe the fishing-grounds to a certain extent. I would first like to point out that the fishermen cannot avoid catching cod under the minimum, and the higher the minimum is raised the greater the number of undersized fish caught. Under the conditions in which the fish are caught, the size of the hooks they use, &c., these small fish are unavoidably caught, or at any rate a large number of them, and I would also state emphatically that when caught they are badly if not fatally injured. I will describe for you a day's fishing. It may be the fishermen reach the grounds after having lost several days through bad weather. They reach the ground and they try this place and that place, and they do not get on to the fish because the fish are not always in the same spot. Presently they strike out. I have known boats who got all their catch of fish in perhaps an hour. The fish are caught with lines, and are found in the bottom of the ocean—their home is close to the bottom, for the cod never rise above the bottom. The fishermen jerk the line rapidly as soon as a pull is felt, the line is pulled up very rapidly, and when the fish reach the edge of the boat they are jerked off with a rapid jerk which the fishermen learn after long experience. If the fish do not come off with the jerk the fishermen dash them against the side of the boat. The new regulations say that the fishermen are to carefully select fish of a certain size, and if the fish are too small they must throw them overboard so that they may swim to the bottom and recover. The fishermen maintain that in catching the fish they unavoidably injure them so badly that very few would ever reach the bottom. Not only are they badly injured by the hook that has been jerked through their mouth, breaking their jaws and otherwise injuring them, but there are the natural enemies of the fish—gropers and suchlike fish—that are swimming about under the water and on the top of the water. For the last few years there have been large flocks of mollymauks. In past years they were not in evidence in these waters at all. Mollymauks breed down in the southern islands; they are large birds of the albatross species. A fisherman can hardly put a line with bait on it slowly over the boat's side without these birds seizing hold of the bait. In fact, I have been out fishing myself and caught several blue-cod, and have tried to return them to the water without these birds catching hold of them. Sometimes mollymauks catch hold of a person's finger if held over the side of the boat, so fishermen have great difficulty in returning these fish alive, when not injured by the hook, into the water. So I maintain that a very small proportion of the fish that are caught, even if they escape their natural enemies, reach their natural habitat in the bottom of the ocean. I also maintain that cod from 8 oz. to 10 oz. are good, sound, juicy fish, and not to be objected to for any reason, and I would also like to point out that since these regulations came into force increasing the minimum from 8 oz. to 16 oz. it has been a very great loss to the fishermen engaged in the industry in Stewart Island and elsewhere. To give one short example: I was round at Half-moon Bay on Wednesday and I saw a young fisherman there. I said to him, "You went out fishing this morning?" He said, "Yes, I went out this morning, but I am back again." It was about 12 o'clock. I said, "Could you get any fish?" He said, "Yes; they were biting, but all about a pound weight, so they were no use to me." This man had gone out about eight to ten miles to sea, had been steaming about for hours, and got nothing for his day's work; and if these regulations had not been in force he would have got a fair supply of good medium fish and would have made a small day's wages. That is a simple example, but the loss to the fishermen in the aggregate mounts up very highly. I have here a paper I wish to hand in to the Court—a sworn statement extracted from the books of the captain of the Harbour Board at Stewart Island, who checks the cases exported from month to month for the wharfage dues to the Harbour Board—and I would like to compare the figures last year showing the number of fish that had been exported previous to these new regulations coming into force with the number that have been exported since. For the months of February, March, and April, 1910, there were 2,304 cases exported; in 1911, 2,318 cases; 1912 (this present year), for the first three months of the season there was a great rise—we had 3,102 cases exported. For the second part of the year 1911 we had 2,190 exported; but this year, for the second part—that is, after the month of May, when the new regulations were in force, there was a falling-off, and we had only 1,261, a falling-off of over 900 cases. I