

RABBIT NUISANCE.

The administration of the Rabbit Nuisance Act has been carried out energetically during the year, and although the whole of our expectations have not been realized good spade-work has been done, and with favourable conditions a very great improvement should be shown in the near future. Weather conditions have been unfavourable for the suppression of the pest, and although good work was done in the early part of the season the improvement could not be followed and maintained, owing to the continuous wet weather manifesting itself when poisoning operations should have been pushed ahead.

The 1918 amendment to section 2 of the Act has been adversely criticized in some quarters, and strong representations have been made for its withdrawal; but the past year's experience has more than demonstrated the absolute necessity that existed for the strengthening of the Department's hands, and the statements made in support of the agitation have, in my opinion, done more to show this than otherwise. As I mentioned in my last report, the section in question may be said to be drastic, but administered with judgment and fairness, as I am prepared to say it has been, it is no more drastic than other enactments administered by the Department. No prosecution has yet been authorized without corroborative evidence being forthcoming from an independent Inspector or Inspectors of the conditions existing, and each application is reviewed by the Superintendent of the district, and also by myself personally, before being authorized. Advantage has not in the slightest degree been taken of the provision "to the satisfaction of the Inspector" in connection with these prosecutions. The Magistrate is always there to see fair play and that there is no sign of persecution on the part of an Inspector. Prosecutions are not liked by the Inspectors, who would be much happier without them, and are in no more favour with the Department; but, unfortunately, there are some landholders who must be prosecuted or nothing would be done. The complaints voiced during the year have not been from those who are anxious to rid their country of the pest, but from the dilatory owners and others who have an interest in the export of rabbits and their skins. I am thoroughly convinced that any amendment to the Act tending to weaken its present powers will have an effect that would be disastrous, and any progress made would be entirely lost.

The high price to which rabbit-skins soared during the year only tended to aggravate the trouble and was not an unmixed blessing.

I append the reports made by the respective District Superintendents on the rabbit pest in the portions of the Dominion controlled by each:—

Dunedin.—The rabbit nuisance entails an enormous amount of work on the Division. On the whole the year was not a favourable one for suppressing rabbits. Early and excessive breeding occurred owing to a mild winter and early spring, while the continuous wet season later interfered considerably with the work of destruction, and this, together with the extra insincerity of many landowners, has caused the increase of the rabbit pest to an alarming extent. No doubt the high price ruling for skins last year was a further incentive to many dilatory and short-sighted property-owners to save rabbits as much as possible in anticipation of receiving substantial remuneration from the pest this season, although greatly to the detriment of their flocks. It is now a recognized fact that bonuses have been freely demanded and paid, some of which are on the percentage basis and others by lump sum. Unfortunately, the work of destruction is greatly controlled by rabbit-exporters, skin-merchants, and a huge gang of professional rabbiters, all out to make the most of the position, which is surprisingly tolerated by owners of infested lands. Therefore thorough and systematic steps for the eradication of the pest are rare. Extensive trapping was carried on till late in the year, and after rabbits were frightened and scattered poisoning without any system was resorted to in places, much of which was only patchwork, and consequently not effective. The recent big drop in the price of skins and the closing of at least some of the rabbit canning and freezing works came somewhat as a bomb-shell to those interested. The 1918 amendment to the Rabbit Nuisance Act now places the Department on a sound footing, but it is greatly deprecated by the rabbit-farmers and naturally much denounced by them. Nevertheless it is being the means of making landowners realize their responsibilities, and will eventually compel them to work hand-in-hand with the Department. Phosphorized pollard and oats, strychnine with carrots, swede turnips, or oats, and fumigating with bisulphide of carbon, charcoal, and chemical, also with lignite sulphurous coal, are all more or less resorted to, and are capable of good results if thoroughly carried out. The supply of phosphorus last winter and early spring, owing to war conditions, was limited, and thus interfered with the output of manufactured poison from our depots. Fortunately we now have a good stock on hand for the present season. The importation of phosphorus, strychnine, and bisulphide of carbon by the Department was a wise step, and is no doubt greatly appreciated by those using these commodities. Some necessary prosecutions have been instituted, and fines ranging up to £100 (the maximum) have been inflicted. The natural enemy continues to do good work where unmolested by the trapper, but no doubt hundreds of cats, ferrets, stoats, weasels, and hawks are killed annually. Wire netting is of the greatest assistance in dealing with the rabbit difficulty, but unfortunately many existing netting fences are not maintained as circumstances warrant, more especially as this article is now exceedingly costly, the price being almost prohibitive. The following are the 1919-20 sales of poison, &c., by the Department to storekeepers and settlers, also the amount of material used on Crown lands, Native lands, and railway-lines: Phosphorized pollard, 158,827 lb.; phosphorized oats, 6,124 lb.; phosphorus, 285 lb.; strychnine, 2,414 oz.; bisulphide, 315 gallons. Material used on Crown lands and railway-lines: Phosphorized pollard, 7,156 lb.; phosphorized oats, 292 lb.; strychnine, 4 oz.; cartridges, 750 (approximately); charcoal, 63 bags; chemical, 21 bags; coal for fumigating, 4 bags; bisulphide, 713 lb.

Christchurch.—During the year more and better work has been carried out for the destruction of rabbits than ever before in this district. Taken on the whole, poisoning was most successful, so that the pest was considerably reduced, but it will take more work yet to reduce the pest to pre-war dimensions. The controversy—trapping *versus* poisoning and other methods of destruction—still continues. Trapping has done more to promote the increase than it has to reduce numbers, as it kills the natural enemies, scatters the rabbits over new country, and, what is a very important factor in the increase of the pest, it thins down the bucks. Many landowners seem slow to see the vast harm done to their properties by allowing the rabbits to become numerous, and they fail to recognize that it would be far more profitable to have clean properties which would provide sufficient feed for cattle and sheep than to have the herbage eaten off and the ground polluted by rabbits. It is regrettable that the price of wire netting is so high at present that it is almost prohibitive. The question of supplying wire netting to settlers under some easy terms of repayment is well worthy of consideration where opportunity offers, as much useful and permanent work can be done by erecting rabbit-netting fences. Poisoning by phosphorized pollard or oats and the use of strychnine are still recognized by experienced landowners to be the cheapest and most effective method of dealing with the pest. Over 104,000 lb. of phosphorized pollard and 400 oz. of strychnine were sold at the Department's depots during the year, as well as 461 lb. of phosphorus. This quantity is far in excess of that sold in any previous year. Inspectors are carrying out their duties under the Rabbit Nuisance Act with tact, while at the same time they are energetically doing all in their power to get the pest reduced, such as serving notices where required, keeping in view simultaneous action on the part of owners of land in the same part of the country, &c., and also following up these notices with inspections with a view to taking action if the owners fail or neglect to take reasonable steps to promote the destruction of rabbits or are not energetic towards that end. During the year a few prosecutions were carried out and the defendants were convicted and fined with costs—the fines varying from £2 to £10. In one of these cases the permission to prosecute was given towards the end of last year. Over and above these, applications were forwarded asking for permission to prosecute in two other cases, but for several reasons these were withdrawn.