

REPORT.

CONDITIONS OF SETTLEMENT.

As will be seen by a reference to the detailed reports of the Commissioners of Crown Lands in Appendix I, the weather of the past year was not uniformly favourable for the farmers, particularly those who relied on dairying as their principal means of support. In the North Island, the winter and spring were somewhat trying, but later on in the season conditions improved, and the total result must be regarded as satisfactory. This is largely accounted for by the increasing demand for dairy-produce and the high prices realized. One gratifying feature of the year was the development of new land that took place partly due to the return of the members of the Expeditionary Force, a large number of whom settled on the land and helped to increase its productiveness, whilst it was noticed that farmers' sons from the South Island are continually being attracted to the lands of the North Island where climatic conditions are milder and where there is a greater quantity of virgin land for development. In the South Island, generally speaking, sheep-farmers did fairly well, although dairy-farmers did not experience a very good season. But on the whole the results were quite up to the average.

Throughout the Dominion the high prices ruling for farm-products of all kinds led to still higher prices being asked and obtained for land than in any previous years, and there was a universal participation in speculation leading to much transferring and trafficking in land of every description.

In this connection it may be mentioned that there are no fewer than 1,400 registered land agents in New Zealand, as against 919 in 1913, when the Land Agents Act was first in operation.

A feature of the year was the number of subdivisional sales of properties that before the war were regarded as only sufficient in area for one holding. This has been very marked in the neighbourhood of centres of population in the North Island. Enhanced prices have been realized, and only the continual demand at high rates for our primary products will enable much of the land to return an adequate income to the present owners.

As an indication of the manner in which the Department's operations affect settlement it may be mentioned that in the agricultural and pastoral statistics, published in the *Gazette* of the 30th October last, it was stated that there were 80,468 occupied holdings of over 1 acre in the Dominion. The returns appended to this report show that there are 33,948 tenants who are occupying Crown lands and national endowments, whilst 755 tenants occupy educational reserves or other class of land administered by this Department. In addition over 3,000 discharged soldiers have been assisted to purchase rural land by means of advances made by the Department under the provisions of the Discharged Soldiers Settlement Amendment Act, 1917. It will therefore be seen that nearly one-half of the settlers of the Dominion who occupy rural land have done so through the instrumentality of this Department, and any change in the land laws of the Dominion affects a very large proportion of its farmers.

LEGISLATION.

The following is a brief summary of the legislation affecting the operations of this Department which was passed during last year's session of Parliament:—

Land Laws Amendment Act, 1919.—This is an Act containing twenty-seven sections. Sections 2 to 10 provide for the setting-up of a Dominion Land Purchase Board, and of such local Purchase Boards in the various land districts as may be required. Section 11 makes provision for the setting-apart for occupation rent-free under special conditions of lands, such as pumice and gum areas, which cannot be profitably occupied under ordinary tenures, and for the making of advances for improvements thereon, &c. Section 19 revives the right of lessees in perpetuity of settlement land who have served abroad in Expeditionary Forces to acquire the freehold of their holdings, and makes this right exercisable up till the 5th November, 1924. Section 20 amends the law with regard to the aggregation of private lands, and sections 25, 26, and 27 make amendments found necessary in the Land Settlement Finance Act, 1909. The remaining sections are what may be termed "machinery" measures embodying improvements in the land laws which have been found necessary in the course of experience.

Kauri-gum Industry Amendment Act, 1919.—Section 3 of this Act gives power to grant leases of lands within kauri-gum districts for recovering kauri-gum and other valuable products, with rights of renewal not exceeding forty-two years in the aggregate, instead of restricting leases to a period of twenty-one years as formerly. Provision is also made for the issue of gum-brokers' licenses, and for increasing the fees to be paid for various licenses issued under the Kauri-gum Industry Act.

State Forests Amendment Act, 1919.—This Act gives power to set apart areas of national-endowment land as provisional State forests, and provides for the payment of the revenue therefrom into State Forests Account, one-half of which is then to be transferred to the National Endowment Account.

Statutes Repeal and Expiring Laws Continuance Act, 1919.—This Act continues the operation until the 31st August, 1920, of the following enactments: Sections 42, 43, and 44 of the Land Laws Amendment Act, 1914, which provide respectively for the exemption of lessees from restrictions with regard to cropping, postponement of rent payable under pastoral licenses, and postponement of rent payable under settlement small-grazing-run leases.

Reserves and other Lands Disposal, &c., Act, 1919.—This Act, which authorizes special dealings with reserves, &c., contains 114 clauses, relating in most cases to matters of purely local interest.

Appropriation Act, 1919.—This Act confers on the Minister of Finance, *inter alia*, power to borrow further moneys for the purposes of the Hauraki Plains Act, 1908, not exceeding in the aggregate £300,000; also for the purposes of the Rangitaiki Land Drainage Act, 1910, up to an amount not exceeding £250,000.

Regulations.—An amendment in the ballot regulations made during the current year makes provision for land ballots being prepared and conducted on a simplified system suggested by an officer of this Department. Under this new system a great deal of the laborious work formerly necessitated by large ballots can be avoided.