

Since the Avonhead Poultry Demonstration Farm was taken over from the Repatriation Department, about a year ago, it has been conducted on more or less commercial lines. This plant was designed for the special purpose of training returned soldiers in poultry-work, and for this it fulfilled its purpose. During the year a large portion of the buildings and appliances was destroyed by fire, and has not yet been renewed.

The poultry industry has made good progress. As was expected, the restriction placed on the importations of Asiatic egg-pulp had a gratifying effect. It gave the producer confidence in the industry, with the result that the poultry-stock of the Dominion has increased to an extent that the local demand for eggs has been well met (except during the winter months) at a reasonable price to the consumer. In view of the ample wheat-supply available, and in anticipation of a greater increase of eggs during the next main producing season, it is proposed by the various poultry organizations to make a good-sized shipment to the London market early next spring. Last spring a small consignment of eggs in shell and egg-pulp was sent to London by the Auckland Co-operative Egg Circle. The egg-pulp in particular arrived in good condition, and the returns to hand justify the proposal to further test this market. While it is not desired in any way to deprecate the opening-up of an overseas trade, probably much more could be done yet in the direction of building up the local trade for guaranteed fresh eggs.

Wool Instructional Work.—A steady demand was experienced for the services of the Wool Instructor, who has lost no opportunity of impressing upon sheep-farmers, by advice and demonstration, the advantage to be gained by the proper skirting and classing of their wool.

Instruction in Swine Husbandry.—The Instructor in Swine Husbandry was kept busy during the year giving advice and lectures, &c., to farmers in various parts of the Dominion. A special bulletin on pig-management was prepared and distributed in considerable numbers.

Rabbit Nuisance.—The exceptional weather conditions experienced during the year throughout the Dominion rendered the control of the rabbit pest especially difficult, with the result that in some districts rabbits became more numerous than they have been for some time past. The high price of winter skins ruling continues to militate largely against the work of destruction of the pest in some districts, where settlers cannot be induced to carry out thoroughly effective work except under compulsion, and this state of things is very unsatisfactory. While a reduction of the pest cannot be reported in all localities, very good work has been done, and in a number of districts a greatly improved position is reported. Before the coming winter is far advanced a decided improvement should have taken place throughout. It is intended to push for efficient following-up work after the general poisoning and other work at present in progress is completed, and if weather conditions are favourable next season it is safe to predict a greatly improved position.

Noxious Weeds.—The administration of the Noxious Weeds Act has again been attended with considerable difficulty, and the necessity for amending the Act is increasingly apparent. A special illustration of this was furnished by the fact that in some parts of the North Island the prevalence of ragwort gave rise to much concern and uneasiness to settlers, while in parts of the South Island the presence of this weed was, and is still, looked upon by settlers with equanimity. In last year's report the advisableness of bringing County Councils in closer association with the operation of the Act was stated, and it is of interest to note that six County Councils have already, by arrangement with the Department, appointed their own Inspectors to deal with noxious weeds within the area under each Council's jurisdiction, while others are moving in this direction. The Counties Act gives the Councils a considerable amount of power to deal with noxious weeds, but there seems to be some doubt as to the extent of the powers conferred by the Act in the direction of providing the necessary funds for noxious-weeds inspection. It may therefore be found necessary to make some amendment to the existing legislation in order to define these powers more clearly. Quite apart from this, the necessity for readjusting the schedules so that local authorities can have power to determine whether Californian thistle, ragwort, and possibly sweetbrier, shall or shall not be treated as noxious weeds within their district is still more apparent, and it is sincerely to be hoped that legislation providing for this, at any rate, will be passed as soon as possible.

The eradication of noxious weeds on Crown and Native lands is a big problem, and one that very greatly retards the work of the Inspectors in dealing with private lands. As previously pointed out, some system of granting leases of these lands rent-free for a period of years, subject to strict conditions as regards the eradication of noxious weeds, is one that deserves very serious consideration by the Departments concerned, in the interests of the lands themselves and also of the country adjoining.

It was unfortunately necessary to institute a large number of prosecutions under the Noxious Weeds Act during the year, 230 applications for authority to prosecute being approved, as against eighty for the corresponding period of last year.

DAIRY DIVISION.

The Dairy Division, under the control of Mr. W. M. Singleton, Director, ably assisted by Mr. W. E. Gwillim, Assistant Director, has had to cope with an especially busy season, and has met all calls made upon it with efficiency and thoroughness.

The Season and Production.—The season under review has probably been unsurpassed for many years past as one eminently suited to maximum growth of grass and maximum production of milk. An increased number of cows grazed under the most favourable conditions has enabled the Dominion to manufacture for export roundly 66,000 tons of butter and 60,000 tons of cheese, and this export gives New Zealand pride of place as the greatest exporter of butterfat in the world.

The unprecedented increase in supply of milk and cream has taxed the resources of many dairy factories. The tendency for some years has been to handle the increased supply in large factories rather than in more factories, and, as a result, during the period between the financial years ending 31st March, 1917, and 1923, the output of the average butter-factory increased 142·4 per cent., and the output of the average cheese-factory increased 43·2 per cent.