

SIR,—

Department of Lands and Survey, Wellington, 5th June, 1923.

I have the honour to submit herewith the annual report on the settlement of Crown land for the year ended 31st March, 1923.

I have, &amp;c.,

J. B. THOMPSON,

The Hon. D. H. Guthrie, Minister of Lands.

Under-Secretary.

## REPORT.

### REVIEW OF PAST YEAR.

A GLANCE at the detailed reports submitted by the Commissioners of Crown Lands, in Appendix I, will show that the past year has been one of progress, and that much more satisfactory conditions prevailed generally throughout the Dominion. The weather was favourable to farming except towards the end of the season, and there was a marked increase in development of land and its productiveness. The dairying industry was profitable, and proved the mainstay of a large proportion of the Crown tenants, and the upward lift given to the pastoral industry through higher prices being realized for the sale of wool materially assisted our runholders. Although there was a steady demand for dairy-produce the prices were not high as compared with many previous years, whilst prices of dry stock have been consistently low, although lambs realized higher prices last season than for many years. However, there was a general improvement in farming conditions, and farmers view the future much more optimistically. This must be discounted to a certain extent by the fact that many landowners are still burdened with having to pay interest on the high prices that they paid for their holdings during the past few years; but the position is gradually improving through concessions being granted in some cases by the mortgagees and in other cases by the passing of holdings to persons better able financially to work them.

So far as the Crown is concerned, everything possible has been done to assist its tenants where it is seen that the circumstances of the case merit concessions being granted, and the Land Boards and the Government have in all cases manifested the greatest sympathy for the "trier."

Although the percentage of unpaid rents is still very large, it is hoped that this will gradually diminish, and as times improve the position will work back to normal. Tenants may apply for revaluation of land or postponement of rent or extension of time to pay, and much has already been done in this direction. It may be mentioned that the leases and licenses on the books of the Department amounted at the 31st March last to over thirty-five thousand, and as the Crown has also advanced money under the Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act to nearly five thousand discharged soldiers to enable them to acquire freehold land, a very large proportion of the farmers of the Dominion are on the books of the Department and come under the jurisdiction of the Land Boards and of the Minister of Lands.

### DEPARTMENTAL CONFERENCE.

A conference of Commissioners of Crown Lands, representing the Auckland, North Auckland, Gisborne, Hawke's Bay, Taranaki, Wellington, and Canterbury Districts, and presided over by the Under-Secretary, was held at Wellington on Tuesday, the 13th March, 1923, to discuss matters of land-administration, and in particular the disposal of farms abandoned or forfeited by discharged soldiers. Uniform methods of management were decided on, and much good was done by the discussion of current problems.

### LAND-RECLAMATION OPERATIONS.

Close attention is being paid to the drainage of swamp lands, either Crown or freehold, now under development by the Department.

Appendix III brings out in detail the activities of the Land Drainage Branch, and shows that every effort is being made to bring areas to profitable settlement.

Opportunity is here taken to stress the difficulties attendant upon reclaiming the very wet and in many instances floating swamps. There is not only the provision of large outfalls and minor ditches to be arranged for, but also the important question of adequate road-formation and attendant public facilities being provided. This effort is being made, and is largely the cause of areas not being so quickly made available for selection as was the case in earlier periods. It is useless offering swamp lands in their early stages of unwatering, and such course would only result in disappointment and embarrassment all round.

The wise policy of purchasing up-to-date excavating plant, adopted in 1920, has borne fruit, and the following shows the increased output of mechanically excavated material: 1920-21, 498,627 cubic yards; 1921-22, 858,860 cubic yards; 1922-23, 1,335,140 cubic yards.

The return of 1920-21 was obtained by the plant then at our command; that of 1921-22 shows increase due to part of new plant being put into operation; while 1922-23 return shows that the balances of plant purchased have since come into commission and further improved the output. This new plant comprises floating and dry-land dredges, drag-lines, and steam-navvies.

The following indicates the areas already reclaimed and in course of development: Crown land drained and settled, 49,200 acres; Crown land under development, 61,800 acres; private land drained or partly improved, 109,580 acres. In addition, further extensive areas of private land will be dealt with as operations proceed.