

The total number of tenants at the close of the year was 1,541, occupying an area of 640,238 acres, and returning an annual rental of £146,946.

The amount of arrears of rent on the 31st March, 1924, was £72,057, owing by some four hundred selectors. About three-fourths of this amount is owing by discharged-soldier settlers on lands set apart under the Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act. Arrears of payments on soldier mortgages are also heavy, comprising—Farms, £23,027; dwellings, £3,684; and current account interest, £5,818: a total of £32,529. Every effort has been made consistent with the sympathetic attitude of the Department towards soldiers to secure payment of the arrears, and, while a considerable amount of revenue has been recovered by judicious pressure, the position is far from satisfactory. Of course, the activities of the Revaluation Board affect the position considerably, and it is to be hoped that many who are playing a waiting game at present will move in the matter of their arrears before many months have passed. Climatic conditions have also affected payments considerably, as the drought of the summer months was a set-back to many Crown tenants. The figures for the Hawke's Bay District are none the less striking because of the high rentals paid by many Hawke's Bay settlers. Annual rentals running into three figures are more the rule than the exception, and naturally the amount of arrears very soon assumes a formidable figure when fed by such rentals.

The matter of arrears is one which has caused and is causing the Land Board and office staff no little anxiety and work, and it is felt that the only possible course open is to continue to exert pressure on every individual settler. There is a feeling also that there are a large number of men in debt to the Department who can pay and would pay if compelled, and lack of adequate inspection prevents the office from taking the necessary action. The full-time services of an officer in the office and one in the field would, I believe, be well worth while, and would result in a big reduction in the amount outstanding. In the meantime the matter of arrears is kept well in view, and will remain so, and by persistent pressure on individuals payment will be secured wherever possible.

TARANAKI.

(J. COOK, Commissioner of Crown Lands.)

Conditions and Progress of Settlement.—The prices for primary products have been well maintained during the year, and the increased price for wool has improved the financial position of many settlers. Good prices have been obtained for sheep; but cattle, which are so necessary for crushing fern and second growth on many Taranaki farms, have to be kept mainly for that purpose and not for profit. The noxious weeds menace has not been so pronounced as last year, ragwort being kept more in check, especially in the coast districts, by the depredations of a caterpillar; but the peripatetic blackberry and assorted varieties of ferns, with their various allies, are still in evidence.

Revenue and Arrears.—The revenue for the year was £77,460, as against £104,543 last year. A further fall in the receipts from the purchase of west coast leases largely accounts for this. The rents for education reserves totalled £10,478, and those from Crown sections £24,580. An endeavour has been made to keep the arrears as low as possible, and every selector's case has been treated on its merits.

Land remaining for Selection.—This is practically all rough grazing-country, difficult of access, and it is not likely that any of it will be selected unless the beef-market takes a turn for the better. There are still some sections available on the Huatoki Settlement, near New Plymouth, averaging about 6 acres. With a good bus service these would offer some attraction to a man with a growing family, when the farm and dairy work could be distributed. To the young married man working in town they offer some inducement at first, but the selector is soon disillusioned. The sections are too small to make a living off, and too large for a man to keep in order in his spare time. It is doubtful whether poultry-farming on a large scale can be made to pay; fruitgrowing as an industry has yet to be made a success in Taranaki; and the continuous westerly winds in spring and summer restrict operations of bees. The unselected sections on the settlement soon become overrun with weeds and are a menace to the land in the vicinity. Taken all round, it is doubtful whether the purchase of the land for cutting up into small holdings is justifiable. The restrictions on some of the sections have now been removed, and they may be selected by civilians.

Freeholds and Cash Lands.—There was a falling-off in the amount received for the purchase of west coast leases, the total amount received being £14,852, in addition to which £4,132 was received for the purchase of other freeholds.

Land Board Work.—The number of cases dealt with by the Land Board remains about the same as last year. The sittings are now usually limited to two days. The number of cases dealt with were as follows: Soldier cases, 342; ordinary transfers, 117; applications, miscellaneous items, 318: total, 777.

WELLINGTON.

(T. BROOK, Commissioner of Crown Lands.)

East of the main dividing-range a dry season was experienced, and the pastures suffered so much that a decided fall in the prices of stock occurred; but early autumn rains brought an abundance of feed, and values were quickly restored. In the northern portion of this district the season was very wet, and a good deal of the bush felled during the year has not been burned.

Grain and root crops that were sown early yielded well, but late-sown crops suffered through the dry weather, and many were scarcely worth harvesting.