

The imported hardwoods are divided naturally into two classes of product, those required for constructional purposes—such as poles, sleepers, bridge and structural timbers, &c.—and those used for building, interior finish, fitments, furniture, car-finishing, &c. To a large extent the constructional timbers do not enter into competition with the local woods, some of which, although suitable for these purposes, exist in such small quantities as to meet only a small portion of the demand. Nevertheless, it has been possible during recent years to extend the utilization of these native timbers, and it is largely due to the increased Government purchases of silver-pine and totara telegraph poles and sleepers that the importations of hardwoods have receded from 26,000,000 ft. b.m. in 1927 to 23,750,000 ft. b.m. in 1928, and to 22,000,000 ft. b.m. in 1929. Of the total hardwood importations, Australia supplies almost 90 per cent., the remainder being oak from Japan, and ash, hickory, mahogany, oak, &c., from Europe and America.

The extent to which the imported hardwoods might be replaced by locally grown woods is not easily determined. Theoretically, the total might appear fairly large, but from a practical standpoint it is estimated that under existing conditions only 5,000,000 ft. b.m., or 20 per cent., of the total hardwood importations might be replaced by the use of indigenous species. By research and development work, however, it should be possible to increase this percentage considerably.

Although the total importation of hardwoods decreased by over 1,500,000 ft. b.m., the total importations of softwoods increased by almost 4,000,000 ft. b.m. from 34,000,000 ft. b.m. for the year ended 31st December, 1928, to 38,000,000 ft. b.m. during the year ended 31st December, 1929.

Douglas fir continues to rank as the most popular of the foreign woods, although the quantity imported during the year ended 31st December, 1929, reported as 16,188,000 ft. b.m., is the lowest on record since 1924.

Californian redwood appears to be challenging Douglas fir for its premier ranking amongst the foreign woods, the quantity imported for the year ended 31st March having reached a total of 11,678,000 ft. b.m., valued at 22s. 4d. per 100 ft. b.m., as compared with only 7,478,000 ft. b.m., and an import value of 23s. 4d. per 100 ft. b.m. imported in the previous year. This increase in trade, fortunately, has not been wholly at the expense of the local woods, but has been shared by western red cedar, the imports of which have receded from 2,066,000 ft. b.m. in 1928 to only 1,335,000 ft. b.m. in 1929. In spite of its high general use value, the cedar does not appear to be able to hold its markets against the competition of the redwood. Practically the whole of the redwood and cedar used is imported in the form of rough sawn material.

Most of the hemlock imported comprises dressed building lines, export-fruit cases and cheese-crates. As regards the dressed building lines and export-fruit cases, it would appear that these have been sold not merely on a price advantage, but on superior service in the way of better manufacture and drying as compared with the competing local woods. Cheese-crates, on the other hand, do not exhibit this same advantage over the locally produced article, and there is little doubt that with more care exercised in their seasoning, the silver-beech, white-pine, and insignis-pine crates would not be merely equal in value, but decidedly superior to the imported hemlock package. The situation in respect to fruit-cases is a peculiar one. White-pine undoubtedly yields the best locally manufactured case, but the prices which the white-pine producer can secure for his timber, both for export and for other domestic use, are so much higher than the case-manufacturer can pay that he is only interested in the trade as an outlet for his offcuts, culls, &c. The same remarks apply to silver beech, and while both of these woods may, by improved manufacture and seasoning, become increasingly available for fruit-case production, more promising results are being secured by improving the technique of manufacture and seasoning of insignis pine.

In spite of the condemnation of spruce butter-boxes by the Dairy Produce Board and by independent authorities upon the European butter-markets, the imports of butter-boxes continue to increase, the figures for the three years ended 31st December, 1927, 1928, and 1929, being 1,807,000 ft. b.m., 2,006,000 ft. b.m., and 3,147,000 ft. b.m. respectively. Aside from the serious risk of tainting the produce, the boxes are decidedly inferior to the local white-pine and silver-beech packages, as proved not only by scientific box-tests, but by service tests on the various overseas markets.

Again, as in the case of the hardwoods, it is difficult to estimate to what extent the softwoods are replaceable by the local timbers. Douglas fir is required for long, light structural members which it is difficult to secure from the New-Zealand-grown woods, and while important Government and local-body building authorities insist upon the wide use of heart timbers for weatherboarding, exterior trim, &c., importations of Californian redwood and Canadian western red cedar are being used to supplement the local supplies of heart timbers. The importation of fruit-cases, which are included in the item "hemlock and spruce," appears to have been justified owing to the difficulty of securing a superfine locally manufactured container for the carriage of export fruit, but it is anticipated that in the very near future considerable improvement in the locally produced insignis pine case will qualify it for the export fruit trade.

It would appear that whereas only 17,000,000 ft. b.m. out of the total softwood importations of 38,000,000 ft. b.m. might be immediately replaceable by local woods, by improved manufacturing and seasoning technique, and by research and development work this quantity might almost be doubled.

One outstanding feature of the year's import trade was the visit of a timber delegation from British Columbia. In so far as its objective was to replace American supplied timber by Canadian woods, the delegation had the support of the Government, this being in line with the declared policy of fostering the internal trade of the Empire, especially with Canada, which is a promising customer for increased quantities of this Dominion's exports of dairy produce, wool, &c. But while New Zealand is fully in sympathy with the Canadian desire to capture as much as possible of the timber imports from other countries, the Government is primarily interested in reducing imports to a minimum, and will continue to encourage and assist the local producers to improve the quality of their products and to secure a larger proportion of the total demand.