

Under the manual methods of work on the aerodromes completed within the last few years the cost has been something like £600,000, whereas by the use of modern excavating plant entirely they should have been completed for approximately £200,000.

There are practically no construction works, of course, that do not obtain some benefit from the use of mechanical plant, but many can be done quite economically with a small quantity of plant to supplement hand labour, and where this can be done the Department has been asked to follow this method in the meantime.

Many instances of considerable saving in cost of construction can be supplied to honourable members, and indications of some of these savings are given elsewhere in this Statement. As stated above, the Department has spent fairly large amounts in the purchase of machinery, but, notwithstanding this, it has been able to increase the number of men employed from 13,696 when the present Government took office to a maximum of 20,100 during last summer, and the number now employed is approximately 19,000.

In travelling about New Zealand it has been apparent to me that the Department's men are employed on works that will help to restore the country to a full measure of prosperity. It has also been apparent that there is room for extension in some directions. While I am convinced that we are catching up rapidly on our main-highway and railway systems, I feel sure that more could be done towards the metalling of our backblocks roads. I have asked the Engineer-in-Chief to prepare a five-year plan for metalling these roads, and an estimated cost of completely metalling all roads used for the transporting of our primary products.

Side by side with this programme there must, of course, be a continued improvement in main highways to keep pace with the growing traffic from these country roads. For this reason, and because of the ever-increasing motor-vehicle traffic, and the apparent inability of local authorities to cope with it, 4,000 miles of highways were last year taken over by the Main Highways Board and made State Highways.

During the transition period arising from the foregoing circumstances, it became apparent that a small section of local-body opinion was still antagonistic towards the changes introduced. Complaints were made, in some cases publicly, that since the change-over the condition of State highways had noticeably deteriorated. In not a few instances anonymous criticism was directed against the Government's policy, but it was evident that this type of opposition was engendered in order to imply that conditions were quite different from the actual state of affairs. Investigations which were made in a number of particular cases showed that the complaints were exaggerated, and generally related to lengths of highway which were in process of reconstruction. It is usually recognized that while a road is being improved some inconvenience and delay must be expected, and this state of affairs is unavoidable because any disturbance of a road surface, necessitated by widening, regrading, realignment, or drainage operations, temporarily produces uncomfortable travelling-conditions, but this does not justify hasty criticism. Perhaps the most reliable judgment as to road conditions is to be found in the opinions expressed by bodies specially organized to watch the interests of the motoring public. These bodies have indicated that the general conditions of State highways are being materially improved, and have given their approbation to the change in policy. I am confident, however, that before very long, when the more extensive works now in hand are completed, and the departmental maintenance organizations are fully developed, the present unreasonable criticisms will totally disappear.

This year a sum of £1,150,000 will be provided from the Consolidated Fund for expenditure on maintenance of public works and services. The expenditure from Main Highways revenue will be £2,572,000; from the Electric Supply Account £745,000; whilst £567,500 will be made available from general revenue. Of the total expenditure under my control out of the Public Works Fund and other