

The Control of Building Materials.

[This interview, specially written for the "N.Z. Building Progress," surveys the whole outlook for building supplies, and deals with the operation of the official control system.]

The constant shortage of building material, and the urgency of the demand for new dwellings forced the building trade into a large measure of Government control early in 1920, and sufficient time has elapsed to secure some idea of how the conditions have worked. In a chat with Mr. W. G. Macdonald, Chairman of the Board of Trade, the Editor of the "N.Z. Building Progress" secured a good deal of interesting information on these points. Mr. Macdonald showed a good general grasp of the outstanding features of the building business, and his views are well worth publication.

GOOD TIMBER SUPPLIES.

"The key to the whole position," said Mr. Macdonald, "is cement. There are signs now that the production of timber is beginning to overtake the demand, although in some districts there are decided shortages. Take Canterbury, for instance. It is unfortunately situated because it has to depend on getting sufficient tonnage to lift the timber from Greymouth. Tonnage has been difficult to obtain, and the supply of timber is consequently short in Canterbury, though the timber is available on the West Coast. Auckland and other parts of New Zealand are more or less well provided, though it is clear that there are no large stocks.

"During the last six weeks the price of imported timber—Oregon, redwood, etc.—has receded considerably. Six weeks ago Oregon was quoted approximately at 60s. c.i.f., Auckland, but to-day quotations are coming to hand as low as 28s. This should have a steadying effect upon local timbers."

THE BRICK SUPPLY.

"As for bricks, the shortages which occur are purely local, on account of the fact that bricks cannot be economically transported over long distances. The shortage from June till November was most noticeable in Auckland and Wellington. Since then the Wellington production has been increased to such an extent that it is now capable of coping with the local demand. Auckland still appears to be in the throes of shortage, but it is hoped that this will ease at an early date.

NEW ZEALAND CEMENT SHORTAGE.

"As I have already said," continued Mr. Macdonald, "the cement shortage is the key to the trouble in the building industry. In round figures, there is a shortage to-day of approximately 50,000 tons, and this is due almost entirely to the difficulties in getting sufficient coal for the cement works. The Warkworth plant, in the Auckland district, has not produced a single ton of cement since September, 1919. This plant alone is capable of producing

50,000 tons per annum, and if it had been possible to have allocated this works sufficient coal you can see from what I have stated in regard to the general position that by this time we would have overcome the shortage. The other Northern works, at Onerahi, has not been producing to its full capacity, and in regard to this works it is no solution to secure coal from outside New Zealand, as the plant is so constructed that Newcastle coal is not suitable. The coal required has to come from the Whangarei mines.

IMPORTATIONS.

"An attempt has been made to overcome the difficulty by importing cement. In September the price of the imported article on the average worked out at about £15 or £16 per ton, which is at least double the price of New Zealand cement. This allows for the rebate of duty, which is at the rate of 12s. 6d. per ton. Since then, quotations have been received for cement as low as £10 per ton from Europe, if sent by sailing vessel, and ordered in not less than 2,000 ton lots. But this quotation would not be a fair comparison to the New Zealand rate, for no purchaser would be able to take so much in one order, and it would be delivered at one port, whereas the New Zealand quotation covers delivery to the nearest port in the Dominion, and is thus inclusive of New Zealand coastal freight and wharfage. A Canadian cement has been coming in at £12 and upwards. Manifestly it is better to supply the New Zealand cement works with sufficient coal to enable them to run to capacity than to encourage the importation of foreign cement, which is not accompanied, as in the case of the New Zealand article, with a guarantee of quality. Cement is one of those articles which deteriorate when kept for any length of time, and most users consequently prefer to get regular supplies at frequent intervals than to take large quantities and keep it in stock.

"The Board of Trade hopes that early in 1921 arrangements will be made whereby the New Zealand cement companies will be supplied with their full requirements of coal, even though they may have, in some cases, to use the higher priced foreign coal in preference to New Zealand coals. Even then, the price at which cement can be turned out in New Zealand will be considerably lower than the cost of the imported cement.

"The shortage for the whole of New Zealand is about 50,000 tons, and it will give your readers an indication of the relative requirements if I quote the details of the outstanding orders in the Wellington district, for the proportions are about the same in all districts: