

have been made to destroy them, the colony is not only suffering a heavy annual loss from the very great numbers still existing in infested districts, but that the area infested is constantly increasing.

3. Thus at the present time rabbits are making their way into the Provincial District of Canterbury from the Amuri in the north and from the McKenzie Country in the south and west; whilst in the North Island they are spreading from the Waikato into the King Country, and from the Wairarapa into Hawke's Bay, where their further spread has been arrested by the erection of a rabbit-proof fence, the cost of which has been defrayed by a voluntary rate contributed by many of the sheepowners in the Hawke's Bay Sheep District, and administered by a Board elected by the contributors.

4. This annual loss has assumed such serious proportions that, in the opinion of the Committee, it occupies a position of importance second to none which can engage the attention of the Legislature.

5. Taking the above facts and conclusions as a basis, the main question which obviously suggests itself is, Has the experience of the past disclosed any means by which the pest can be reduced to harmless dimensions in the different classes of country affected.

6. The answer to this must be in the affirmative unless in exceptional cases.

7. Evidence was given before the Committee in 1884 which showed most conclusively that the liberal use of phosphorized grain, followed up by the filling-in of rabbit burrows and water-runs, the liberation of stoats and weasels, ferrets, cats, &c., and the use of other means disclosed by the evidence, had, in some instances, been successful in some descriptions of country; and the evidence now before the Committee, after an interval of two years, is conclusive in the same direction.

8. The Committee is also of opinion that the means here alluded to should be supplemented by the erection of rabbit-proof fences.

9. It is obvious, therefore, that the whole question is narrowed down to two important issues—

(1.) Is it desirable to amend the present Rabbit Nuisance Act?

(2.) Has its administration been of the efficient character which is indispensable in connection with such an important question?

10. With regard to the first question, the Committee is of opinion that the provisions of the Act are, on the whole, fairly calculated to effect the purposes for which it was enacted.

11. It, however, recommends that it should be so amended as to provide for simultaneous action on the part of landholders in the destruction of rabbits; and that, whilst the maximum penalty for neglect or breach of the provisions of the Act should be increased to £100, the defendant in every case should have the right to produce evidence in mitigation of the penalty inflicted, and, where the penalty exceeds £10, to appeal to a higher tribunal.

12. These amendments, the Committee thinks, will do away with the only just ground of complaint against the Act, and it is also of opinion that the dissatisfaction which has been freely expressed against the arbitrary powers conferred on the Inspectors will to a large extent cease.

13. The Committee is also of opinion that, if the ratepayers in any one or more counties in the colony express by petition to the Governor their desire to have the administration of the Rabbit Nuisance Act placed in the hands of Trustees elected by themselves, such request should be granted, and such Trustees should be empowered to levy rates for the purpose of doing such things as are now done by the Government in connection with the Rabbit Nuisance Act, and also for the purpose of the erection of wire-netting fences or for any other protective works which may be considered necessary by such Trustees either in reducing or preventing the spread of the rabbits; and that the Government should assist local efforts by granting a subsidy to the extent of _____ pound to every pound raised by local rates and spent in the administration, destruction, or spread of the rabbits; subject, however, to the supervision of the Government Inspector, and, on condition that, in case of failure to exclude or destroy the pest, the administration of the Act should be resumed by the Government, and the powers of the Trustees should be withdrawn.

14. Where a rabbit-proof fence is erected as a protective fence through Crown lands, the Committee is of opinion that the land on which the fence is erected, and to the extent of one chain in width on each side of it, should be reserved from sale and placed under the control of the Chairman of the Board of Trustees, and that power should be granted to any local body to enable it to enter and expend its funds on any reserve under its control for the purpose of destroying rabbits.

15. In accordance with this opinion the Committee recommends that the necessary machinery for the formation of such districts be provided by legislative enactment.

16. With regard to the second question, namely, the efficiency of the past administration of the Act, it is with much regret that the Committee finds itself compelled to reply emphatically in the negative, and to reaffirm in the strongest manner that portion of the report of the Committee of 1884, quoted below, which deals with this portion of the question:—

The Committee, however, is strongly of opinion that the most frequent cause of failure to destroy rabbits, and consequent public dissatisfaction, is the evident unfitness of many of the officers for the important and responsible duties imposed upon them. The various witnesses examined were naturally reluctant to name individual cases, but the Committee is none the less satisfied that many appointments have been made of men whose previous history furnished nothing but a record of failure in other walks of life, and incapacity and unfitness for any responsibility such as is contemplated by this Act. To carry out its provisions with vigour, it is necessary that the Inspectors should be allowed to exercise large powers; and when it is remembered that, under present arrangements, these same officers are intrusted with the working of the Sheep Act, it will be at once recognized that they have duties to perform involving great responsibility, and requiring the use of much tact and judgment.

The Committee think these considerations cannot fail to give weight to the remarks above made relating to the appointment of officers, and to impress the Government with the duty which rests upon them of at once dispensing with the services of men unqualified for such an important duty.

17. The Committee feels bound to point out that few or no steps have been taken by the Government to remedy the state of affairs indicated by the above quotation.