

To deal efficiently with the rabbit nuisance it is necessary that large powers should be placed in the hands of the officers appointed to carry out the provisions of the Act, but it is not intended that they should be exercised in an arbitrary or unjust manner. A firm, impartial, and judicious administration of the Act will produce far more satisfactory results than any hasty and spasmodic display of great authority. In the hands of fitly-qualified men it can be made effective without unduly oppressing any one; but it must not be forgotten that it can easily be made an engine of tyranny and the cause of serious opposition to all endeavours to stamp out the pest if administered with unnecessary harshness, partiality, or want of judgment. It is therefore of the utmost importance that every appointment to an office under it should be made with the greatest care, and such officers as have shown incapacity or unfitness for their office, or who have acted improperly in the discharge of their duties, should at once be removed. Moreover, for the more efficient working of the Act, the officer in charge of a district should be held responsible for that district and for the conduct of those under him.

The complaints brought to the notice of the Committee relate, in far the greater number of cases, to the faults of officers in administering the Act; but, whilst giving due weight to these, the Committee cannot recommend that the administration of the Act should be handed over to the local bodies, such as County Councils or Road Boards.

Nevertheless they are of opinion that, in parts of the colony still free from rabbits, or only slightly infested with them, the ratepayers, if they so wish it, should, for the purpose of more effectually preventing the spread or increase of rabbits, be permitted to place the administration of the Act within their district in the hands of Trustees, to be elected by themselves, who should have power to levy rates within their district, to be spent in the erection of wire-netting fences or the carrying-out of other protective works, 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the pest, the administration of the Act should be resumed by the Government, and the powers of the Trustees should be withdrawn.

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

It still remains to refer to the Crown lands reserves and commonages. Of these, very large areas, including the roughest and most inaccessible portions, are at present unleased, the inducements held out by the Crown Lands Department of long leases and extended acreage having only partially succeeded in securing tenants. Arrangements have, however, been made, at the expense of the Government, for the destruction of rabbits upon them—in many instances with the occupiers of adjoining lands, and in others by contracts with professional rabbiters. In this way the pest has been to a certain extent kept in check, but more should be done. At the same time the Committee recognize that the question of how to deal with these unoccupied tracts of country is the most difficult that has come before them. It is there that the most secure breeding-grounds are afforded for rabbits, and so long as this continues to be the case there is no hope of effectually preventing the adjoining lands from being constantly re-stocked by them. The "natural enemies"—feline and raptorial—will here prove the best and most economical means of permanently diminishing the nuisance; and the Committee recommend that the Government should without delay take steps to provide for a large and constant supply of stoats, weasels, martens, ferrets, and, if possible, for the introduction of a species of hawk somewhat more powerful and rapacious than that which is indigenous to New Zealand.

A long time, however, must elapse before these animals can multiply sufficiently to be able to cope satisfactorily with the pest, and in the meanwhile the present system of destroying the rabbits by contract will have to be continued. Under these circumstances there is great danger that a large proportion of the "natural enemies" will be killed. It must rest with the Government alone to take every precaution against such a result.

Another difficulty arises from the fact that within a few years a large number of the Crown pastoral leases will terminate, and, therefore, that the tenants are daily becoming less interested in the destruction of the rabbits upon their holdings, and, consequently, less inclined to spend money for that purpose. At the same time, the lands included in these leases, from their positions and character, are generally more liable than private lands to be overrun by the pest, and therefore more expensive to deal with. Should this lead to a large increase of the rabbits at the end of the term, there must be a corresponding decrease of rent to the Government under the new leases. In order, if possible, to avoid such a result, the Committee are of opinion that it would be advisable for the Government, in any case in which the tenant was willing to surrender his lease, to accept such surrender at any time within eighteen months before the expiry thereof, and thereupon to offer the lease for a fresh term for sale by auction. This course, the Committee think, is preferable to giving a bonus in any shape for rabbit-skins, or to assisting the pastoral tenants of the Crown in any other way.

Lastly, the Committee recognize that the means at present available for the destruction of the pest are mere palliations, not cures, and that until some discovery more searching and fatal in its effects upon the rabbit than anything at present known has been made, its absolute eradication, and the cessation of the present large expenditure in connection with it, cannot be looked for. Such a discovery is not beyond hope. Somewhat similar discoveries, which have proved of the greatest value, are on record; and the Committee recommend the Government to take such steps, including the offer of a bonus, as may appear to them best calculated to bring about the attainment of such a desirable object.

On the motion of Mr. Buchanan, it was resolved, That the consideration of the report be postponed till next meeting of the Committee.

Then the Committee adjourned till Wednesday next, the 14th July, at 10.30 a.m.