

The information thus obtained shows that, although the rabbits have in some districts somewhat diminished in numbers, the Committee is reluctantly forced to the conclusion that, not only is the colony suffering a heavy annual loss from the very great numbers still existing in infested districts, but that the area infested is annually increasing.

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 Wairarapa into Hawke's Bay, "where their further spread has been arrested by 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," and from the Waikato into the King Country.

This annual loss assumes a seriousness which, in the opinion of the Committee, places the whole question in a position of importance second to none which can engage the attention of the Legislature.

Taking the above facts and conclusions as a basis, the first 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, and at a reasonable cost?

The answer to this must be in the affirmative.

Evidence of a most conclusive character was given before the Committee in 1884 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 numerous instances, effectually settled the difficulty in most descriptions of country; and the evidence now before the Committee, after an interval of two years, is absolutely conclusive in the same direction.

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

It is obvious, therefore, that the whole question is just 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 all must admit should be made absolutely imperative in connection with such an important question?

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.

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 his favour in mitigation of the penalty inflicted, and, where the penalty exceeds £10, to appeal to a higher tribunal.

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.

The Committee is also strongly of opinion that in parts of the colony the ratepayers, if they so wish it, should, for the purpose of more effectually preventing the spread or increase of rabbits, be empowered by law to place the administration of the Act within their district in the hands of Trustees, to be elected by themselves, who should "be enabled to claim pound for pound from the Government on rates to be levied within districts not infested by the pest, such rates and subsidy to be spent in the erection of wire-netting fences or the carrying-out of other protective works on Crown or freehold land;" 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.

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 vested in the Chairman of the Board of Trustees; that power should be granted to any local body to enable it to enter on any reserve for the purpose of destroying rabbits; and that any owner shall be entitled to call upon the owner or owners of adjoining lands to contribute to the construction of a dividing fence between their respective lands, as provided in section 9 of "The Fencing Act, 1881," which fence shall be rabbit-proof, according to schedule of rabbit-proof fence attached hereto.

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

With regard to the second question, it is with much regret that the Committee finds itself compelled to reply emphatically in the negative, and to indorse in the strongest manner that portion of the report presented to the House by the Committee of 1884, and 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.

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