

SESS. II.—1891.
NEW ZEALAND.

IMPORTATION OF SLEEPERS AND FOREIGN TIMBERS

(CORRESPONDENCE WITH RAILWAY COMMISSIONERS RELATING TO THE).

Return to an Order of the House of Representatives, dated the 25th August, 1891.

Ordered, "That the Railway Commissioners be requested to lay before this House any correspondence with them in relation to the importation of sleepers and foreign timbers."—(Mr. WILSON.)

No. 1.

The RAILWAY COMMISSIONERS to the Hon. the MINISTER for PUBLIC WORKS.

The Hon. the Minister for Public Works.

14th July, 1891.

WITH reference to your recent verbal communications on the subject of sleeper supplies, in which you informed me that members in the House of Representatives have taken exception, in the House, to the use of imported timber, and that you thought it desirable to have the Commissioners' views thereon, the Railway Commissioners have the honour to remark as follows:—

They understand that the desire is that the colonial products should be utilised to the fullest extent, so as to afford employment in such manner as to best serve the interests of the colony. The Commissioners desire to assure you that it is their earnest wish to assist in the development of internal industries of the colony to the fullest extent, compatible with the interests of the colony as a whole. From the narrower point of view of the interests of the railways, as a business concern, it is desirable to utilise local products and local labour, as such a practice tends directly and indirectly to promote traffic on the railways. The Commissioners apprehend that there can be no practical difference of opinion on this point.

It has been the practice, from the inception of railway construction, during the last twenty years to import a certain number of hardwood sleepers for special purposes. The Railway Commissioners have not taken any new departure in this respect, but they have diminished the numbers used of late years.

The Commissioners attach a summary for six years past of the returns laid before Parliament in the several annual reports showing the kind of sleepers laid by Working Railways Department in maintaining the lines each year.

The Railway Department has been using the local timbers during the past twenty years, and has therefore the best technical experience of their suitability for sleepers and other railway purposes. The rails are laid on the New Zealand railways, as is well known, without chairs. The softer New Zealand timbers, under these conditions, are economical, and available only where the wear and strains are light, and they do not commend themselves for safety or economy in many positions. Where heavy wheel loads, very sharp curves, steep gradients, and important structures occur it becomes desirable to secure the very best means at command to maintain safe and efficient roads. The birch sleeper is very largely used, but is not economical or reliable in all positions. The puriri is also largely used, and will be more so as supplies are available. This timber, however, is supplied only in the adzed form, and is not adapted for all purposes.

There is no New Zealand timber in the market which can equal the hardwoods of Australia for the combined advantages of strength, hardness, durability, and economy. The quantities now required are relatively unimportant, and will not average more than 5 or 6 per cent. of the annual supplies needed. The expenditure of £1,500 or £2,000 on hardwood sleepers (out of a total of £700,000 a year, which it costs to work the railways) to make our railway transit as safe and secure as we can reasonably manage to do, is scarcely a transaction which can be deemed to prejudicially affect the colonial progress. Such an outlay, at the best, will not affect more than fifteen or twenty people, while the proper conduct of the railway-traffic affects the whole colony. A bad accident, arising from neglecting to secure the best road, which we reasonably can do, may cost the colony as much as would pay for all the hardwood sleepers the railway would require for the next fifty years.

Some very erroneous views of what the Commissioners' practice has been are evidently in circulation. The total expenditure during the last two financial years on all classes of imported timber, whether for sleepers, piles, or other special purposes, has been only about £11,000, while the expenditure on local timbers has been £54,000.

When these facts are made known the Commissioners think that it will be admitted that they have done no more than would be reasonably expected of them to fulfil the duties and responsibilities imposed upon them by the Government of the colony, through the Government Railways Act; and they think that it will also be agreed that it would be injudicious to curtail the responsibility for the safe and proper control of life and property upon the Government railways by adopting any measures which might hinder or deter persons having charge of them from maintaining and keeping them in the safest and most efficient condition which can reasonably be done. The Commissioners would respectfully suggest that this letter may be made a parliamentary paper.

JAMES MCKERROW, Chief Commissioner.

Enclosure.

RETURN of SLEEPERS RELAID—all Sections.

	1884-85.	1885-86.	1886-87.	1887-88.	1888-89.	1890-90.	1890-91.	Total.
Black-pine	55,490	47,143	41,670	22,732	13,408	9,426	6,728	196,147
Totara	13,314	17,560	18,347	8,043	6,652	6,935	22,025	92,876
Black-birch	44,960	37,178	47,271	50,914	52,018	73,379	52,540	358,260
Oregon	2	...	...	...	...	...	...	2
Kauri	2,508	698	2,969	1,792	287	191	176	8,631
Blue-gum	40	32	12	94	43	...	...	221
Jarraha	21,272	24,907	10,186	3,712	1,844	1,321	947	64,189
Ped-pine	1,636	189	113	2,875	...	...	...	4,813
Puriri	6,064	6,899	12,753	26,328	24,205	24,082	16,843	117,174
Silver-pine	1,143	2,560	2,711	5,429	6,257	5,463	6,809	30,372
Manuka	1	...	...	...	...	...	...	1
Rata ... ..	...	721	2,917	137	113	251	1,354	5,493
Kamai ... ..	...	...	1,683	481	2,338	7,104	22,954	34,560
White-pine ... ..	...	...	...	100	...	...	...	100
Creosoted ... ..	...	...	...	...	113	...	...	113
Ironbark ... ..	...	...	...	...	...	266	1,634	1,900
Creosoted red-pine ... ..	...	...	...	...	...	...	4	4
	146,440	137,887	140,632	122,637	107,278	128,418	131,564	914,856

3rd July, 1891.

No. 2.

The Hon. the MINISTER for PUBLIC WORKS to the RAILWAY COMMISSIONERS.

Railway Commissioners.

Public Works Department, Wellington, 20th July, 1891.

RE importation of sleepers for railway-maintenance purposes: Referring to your memorandum of the 14th instant, on the above-mentioned subject, the Minister is much gratified to notice from the return of sleepers relaid on all sections of the New Zealand railways, which accompanied your memorandum, that the number of foreign sleepers used has fallen from 24,938 in 1885-86 to 4,168 for the two years 1889-90 and 1890-91.

The numbers having been steadily decreasing for years, and having now got down to about 2,000 a year, it would appear that the 10,000 foreign sleepers, which the Hon. Mr. Seddon understands the Commissioners contemplate obtaining, will be sufficient for five years, or if diminution in the numbers used goes on increasing, possibly for seven or eight years' requirements.

The Public Works Department has not imported any foreign sleepers for some years, but we have some 6,000 in stock in Dunedin, which, if the Commissioners are particularly in want of sleepers of this class, the Minister will be happy to transfer at the price they cost the department.

Under all the circumstances of the case, therefore, the Minister trusts that the Commissioners will abstain from entering into new engagements for the supply of any large number of imported sleepers.

H. J. H. BLOW,

Acting Under-Secretary for Public Works.

No. 3.

The RAILWAY COMMISSIONERS to the Hon. the MINISTER for PUBLIC WORKS.

The Acting Under-Secretary for Public Works.

11th August, 1891.

YOUR memorandum of the 20th ultimo: The Railway Commissioners desire to thank the Hon. the Minister for Public Works for the offer of 6,000 jarraha sleepers, which they accept, and they have arranged to take over the sleepers. This will do away with the necessity for importing from Australia.

E. G. PILCHER, Secretary.

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