

WESTLAND.

The several schedules accompanying this will show the extent of lands dealt with under the various systems applicable to this district. It will therefore hardly be necessary that I should go minutely into each table. The areas taken up under all the tenures, except that of pastoral lease, are exceedingly limited, and must be so until either the contract of the Midland Railway Company has been determined, or until some arrangement has been come to by which land can be applied for without any vexatious restrictions and indefinite delays. The difficulties and hardships incidental to bush-settlement are sufficient to daunt the majority of people, but when this is aggravated by the uncertainty of securing a title, intending settlers who can leave the West Coast go elsewhere. Those who have attachments, either in the shape of a holding they wish to extend or a family they desire to place near them, are the people who at present care to urge their claims for more land. Fortunately, a settlement of the company's claim to this territory is within measurable distance, so that the extensive area of 581,000 acres, in addition to mining blocks of 84,000 acres in extent, will, I trust, be soon rendered available for settlement. Were this difficulty overcome, I have no doubt future returns would show a substantial advance under many of the systems provided by the present liberal Land Act. No matter how easy the provisions can be made in land-settlement we cannot anticipate a boom in Westland, as the agricultural portion of the district is limited in extent and difficult to bring into a state of cultivation on account of the heavy bush covering the greater part of it.

Several of the river-valleys or flats can, however, be cleared at from £1 10s. to £2 per acre to grow grass and turnips, and when this is done it will carry a sufficient number of cattle to encourage and enable a settler to keep on clearing. There are several of our enterprising farmers doing good work and with satisfactory results in this way. The two localities likely to benefit most by the removal of the Midland Railway Company's reservation are the Wanganui and Wataroa Flats. In these districts the Land Board had decided during the year to pastoral-lease all the surveyed blocks and surrounding country, but after a visit by the Classification Commissioners it was decided that, with the immediate prospect of these lands being made available for close settlement, it would be well to delay dealing with the country for six months. If the expected arrangement with the company is not effected it will be necessary to deal with the country so as to prevent the native feed being eaten out and the stockowners ruined by overstocking; and dealing with the land in some way is the only remedy for this.

During my predecessor's term of office all the land south of the Waiho was reduced to 10s. per acre. Although not quite in accord with a hard-and-fast price for land, I think this was a concession greatly required by the struggling southern settlers. This principle, somewhat modified in the direction of disposing of the surveyed lands, after a careful classification or valuation has been arrived at, should be applied to the unsold lands of Westland. If the valuation were based on a somewhat low and graduated scale it would have a very beneficial effect in the increase of settlement by both the youths of the district and others who have been making inquiry for lands in those localities.

During the year there has been a strong feeling expressed in favour of the purchase by the Government of two estates in this district, and since the visit of the Hon. the Minister of Lands inquiries are being made by intending settlers anxious to acquire the land. I have little doubt but that, were these properties acquired at a reasonable price, they would be settled almost immediately. Land comparatively cleared, such as this is, attracts many who do not care to face the work, expense, and delay of carving out a home in dense bush.

From the tables accompanying this it will be seen that under the occupation-with-right-of-purchase system the greatest area has been taken up; evidently the settlers in this district look forward to the ultimate possession of a freehold in preference to continual rental payments. I think, however, when the full benefit of the lease in perpetuity is realised this will become the popular system of settlement.

Under the heading of "Pastoral Runs" there have been several transactions during the year, besides a good many cancellations. The question of arrears and surrenders will require to be carefully looked to, otherwise there is a tendency on the part of some to treat this matter too easily, in many cases resulting in loss to the department, in consequence of the necessary lapse of time before a forfeiture can be effected and the run again relet.

The mountain-tops between 3,500ft. and 5,000ft. levels are being considerably inquired about, and in some cases taken up as pastoral country. It is found that at this altitude there is fair natural feed, either good tussock or native carrot; the great difficulty, however, is in making tracks through the bush to reach this. Some facilities or encouragement in this direction will have to be given to intending pastoral lessees; were this done, it is probable that the greater part of the lower ranges of Westland would ultimately be held as pastoral runs.

During the year an impetus has been given to the sawmilling trade by the opening of the Grey-mouth-Hokitika Railway and the Midland Railway Company's line to Jackson's. Several new sawmills have started along these lines, and others are purposing to erect more extensive plant to meet the demand. In this also the difficulty in dealing with the Crown lands is greatly felt. As the timber constitutes one of the principal assets of the West Coast, the conditions in connection with obtaining timber-areas should be made as easy as possible; at the same time, it will be equally necessary to conserve the forests, more especially in the direction of indiscriminate cutting of silver-pine and the prevention of fires. As showing the importance of this industry, I may mention that, although two of the largest sawmills have not yet commenced work, the output amounted to 2,902,687ft., exceeding that of last year by 68,083ft.

It may be somewhat outside the scope of this report to refer to the visit to Westland lately of the Hon. the Minister of Lands, were it not to record the opinion expressed that the personal information then obtained by him is anticipated to greatly benefit land-settlement on the West Coast.