

CAUSES OF FIRES.

There can be no doubt that fires are caused by sparks from engines. Allowing for those that may be due to the throwing out of the carriages by passengers of lighted matches or still smouldering stumps of cigars, there are still some that can be accounted for only by sparks falling from the engines on dry inflammable matter. These fires always occur in the dry season, and if there is much wind they spread in spite of all efforts to check them, sometimes doing much injury.

CLAIMS INVESTIGATED, AND FINDINGS THEREON.

Claim of W. S. C. Blackley and Others.

This fire caused considerable damage to a wattle plantation. The exact amount of the damage cannot be given, but it would be somewhere about £1,000. The plantation was about three-quarters of a mile from the railway-line, on the other side of a raupo swamp. The fire started near the line, and spread through the dry vegetation of the swamp, and reached the plantation.

There were Maori gum-diggers about the place where the fire started, and they left immediately afterwards, and have not since returned. It is as likely that this fire was caused by them as by a spark from the engine.

Claim of James Wallace, Papatoitoti.

Mr. Wallace has suffered considerable damage apart from that caused by this particular fire; and, after viewing the ground, your Commissioner is of opinion that the damage is entirely due to sparks from the railway-engines. Owing to the configuration of the ground near his farm, on the opposite side of the railway-line, there appears to be an increased velocity of the prevailing wind at a particular place, which carries sparks on to his grass paddocks. Traces of former fires are very numerous, and, in addition to the damage from this source, there is constant watchfulness required on the part of members of his family during dry seasons in order to extinguish incipient fires after the passing of trains.

The amount of damage due to this particular fire would be about £20.

Claim of John Gardiner, Rakaia.

The fire causing the damage to this claimant started immediately after or just about the time of the passing of the express-train from Christchurch to Dunedin, on a piece of land leased from the department, amongst dry grass cut by the lessee for hay. After viewing the ground your Commissioner is of opinion that the fire came either from that or a former train. If from a previous train it must have been smouldering for a couple of hours. It may have been due to a lighted match or a smouldering cigar-end thrown from the train, but from the position of the road, railway-line, and the fence adjoining it, it is improbable that it was caused by any one trespassing. The fire spread for a distance of some miles, and did great damage, not to the claimant alone, but to others.

The amount of the damage done to the claimant would be about £550; to the Acton Estate, approximately, £520; to Mr. W. White, about £350; to Mr. S. Ross, £3 3s. 4d.; and to Mr. G. Elliott, 17s. 6d.

Claims of Henry Mackle and James Moore.

These two claims arise out of the same fire. It originated either in a plantation near the railway-line, belonging to the Government, or amongst some dry grass near the line. The evidence is conflicting as to whether the land between the plantation and the rails was ploughed. The fire was probably caused by a spark from the engine, but it may have been caused in some other way.

The damage to Mr. Moore's property was about £55, and to Mr. Mackle's about £85.

Claim of George Williams, Woodend.

This claimant's house was burnt during the night. A train had passed about an hour previously, but there is no evidence as to whether the fire was caused by a spark from the engine, or one from the fireplace, smouldering on the roof. The chimney was close to the place where the fire appears to have started. All that can be said is that the fire may have been due to a spark from the locomotive. The house was so near to the line and the wind was blowing in such a direction that there is a strong probability that the fire was caused by a spark from the engine.

The damage your Commissioner estimates at £50.