

SESSION II.
1906.
NEW ZEALAND.

F I R E S O N S H I P S

(INTERIM REPORT OF ROYAL COMMISSION ON).

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

INTERIM REPORT.

To His Excellency the Right Honourable William Lee, Baron Plunket, Knight Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order, Governor and Commander-in-Chief in and over His Majesty's Colony of New Zealand and its Dependencies.

MAY IT PLEASE YOUR EXCELLENCY.

We, your Commissioners, appointed on the second day of August, 1906, "to be a Commission, by all lawful ways and means to examine and inquire into every matter or thing in relation to the cause of fires on ships whose cargo is wholly or partly composed of wool, flax, tow, or other combustible material, and as to what such Commission considers necessary to insure the shipment of such cargo and its conveyance from New Zealand to its destination in such a condition that it will not be liable to fire from spontaneous combustion or any other cause, and also as to the necessity or expediency of amending the existing law with respect thereto," have the honour to submit this, our interim report.

Twenty-six meetings for taking evidence and making inspections have been held, 120 witnesses have been examined, and three meetings have been held in committee. Your Commissioners have, for the better enabling them to gather evidence bearing upon the matters in question, visited and heard evidence at Wellington, Christchurch, Timaru, and Dunedin, and every opportunity has been given to all parties in those centres to submit any evidence to your Commissioners. It is the intention of your Commissioners to ascertain the value of such evidence as may be available in other centres of the colony, in order that such evidence might be taken if it is considered likely to prove of value to your Commissioners in arriving at a final decision.

In view of the many technical points arising, and the necessity of your Commissioners having the advice and assistance of scientists who might be the better able to deal with the questions of the chemical and bacteriological actions arising and operating in wool, flax, and tow under certain and varying conditions, your Commissioners deemed it advisable that the services of the following gentlemen should be placed at the disposal of the Commission, viz., Dr. J. M. Mason, Chief Health Officer; Dr. J. S. Maclaurin, Government Analyst; Mr. B. C. Aston, Chief Agricultural Chemist; and Mr. J. A. Gilruth, Pathologist and Chief Veterinarian. This your Government has approved of, and your Commissioners will at a later stage, should time permit, have the benefit of the assistance and advice of these gentlemen.

Your Commissioners have also arranged to institute tests of various grades and qualities of wool, flax, and tow, in order to demonstrate to their satisfaction the possibilities of spontaneous combustion resulting under certain conditions and in respect of certain qualities of wool, or otherwise. These tests and experiments must of necessity occupy some time, and it will not, therefore, be possible to include in this interim report the results and conclusions arrived at.

Your Commissioners are of the opinion that material assistance might be rendered to them in their investigations by having before them the results of any inquiries which may have been held or made in England touching the causes of the fires which have occurred in the cargoes of vessels arriving there, together with the knowledge of the quality, condition, and description of the wool, flax, or tow which might have been the cause of such fires. Your Commissioners have caused inquiry to be made through the High Commissioner for the colony in London, and your Commissioners are now advised that all the information available has been collected by the High Commissioner for the colony in England, and it is now on its way to New Zealand.

From the evidence adduced before your Commissioners it would appear that for some years prior to the month of June, 1905, the underwriters doing business in insuring wool for shipment from the colony employed certain gentlemen of known ability as marine surveyors to inspect all or any bales of wool which might to them seem in such a condition as likely to result in a claim upon the insurers. These inspectors were stationed at the principal shipping-ports, and invariably kept a watchful eye upon all shipments, although no systematic individual inspection was made