

The Timber Industry.

(Paper by Mr. J. A. Murdoch, Hokitika).

The timber industry is closely allied with the mining industry of Westland and is an equal factor in opening up this part of the Dominion for settlement. In 1916 the timber industry employed nearly 6000 hands.

The greatest national factor in the world to-day is man power. Industries like the timber industries, which support a large number of men, are a necessity to a nation apart altogether from their commercial importance.

In the year 1896, the late Rt. Hon. R. J. Seddon called together a conference having for its object the assisting of the mining industry by seeking more markets for the timber supplies of New Zealand. In 1909 a timber commission sat and after exhaustive enquiry and consideration made two recommendations, first, afforestation; second, no restriction of export.

In the early part of 1918, the dairying and meat freezing industries complained to the Prime Minister that the export of timber was depriving them of supplies. They were either really scared or were simulating fright in order to bring about a condition of the timber industry when timber would be forced on the New Zealand market at ruinously low prices. The sawmillers requested the Prime Minister to call a conference. This conference was held on 4th April, 1918, and the Sawmillers' Federation submitted a scheme of control that would ensure New Zealand's needs being supplied at less than export prices. Under this control it was proposed to levy on the export timber to recompense to the sawmiller who was obliged to supply a New Zealand user. The sawmillers' scheme was not adopted, but other regulations were made having as their object the ensuring of New Zealand's needs being satisfied. Since the position has been thus fixed it has been found that there are very few cases where New Zealand customers have failed to get supplies in the ordinary way of trade. Any request for supplies has received immediate attention and the Sawmillers' Federation has loyally assisted in regulating the industry so as to ensure New Zealand having its needs supplied.

In the matter of fixation of prices it is rather anomalous that while labour which contributes so largely to the production of timber is protected by having a minimum selling price for the product of that labour, the chief clamour for fixation of prices proceeds from the builders who are incensed because the sawmillers have refused to grant to them a 7½ per cent. preference over the general public. So long as the control is in the hands of the Board of Trade, of which the Hon. Mr. Macdonald is President, there is every indication that all interests will receive attention. In my opinion it will be disastrous if the commercial control of timber passes to the Forestry Department, which so far is little more than a name. The Forestry Department has scarcely commenced to breathe, has no staff, and judging by the regulations recently issued with regard to the limitation of timber, is in-

capable of controlling such an important industry and is not seized of the facts necessary to stimulate instead of choking that industry. The Commissioner of Forests has apparently been captivated by idealists who have not fathomed the practical commercial aspect of forestry. As showing the impracticability of the Commissioner's advice it is illuminating to read from Mr. D. E. Hutchin's report on the Waipoua kauri forest, page 42, dated the 8th November, 1918. Fancy this country being put to the expense of obtaining from this learned author such statements as the following when discussing the question of timber hauling:—

"With no wild animals in New Zealand the sereno lands of New Zealand should be a donkey's paradise" (see page 42 of his report), and on the succeeding page he advocates that buffaloes should be introduced into New Zealand for the purpose (so far as we can see), of trampling down the undergrowth in order that well-paid officials like himself would be able to ride through our forests in comfort. Is this the kind of advice upon which our Forestry Department is moving and making regulations? And is this the kind of advice upon which to base our forestry policy? There is grave danger that the swing of the pendulum from the too long neglected forestry will go to the other extreme and that, surrounded by idealists with the commercial experience, the Commissioner of Forests will be led to inflict unnecessary and harmful restrictions upon the timber industry. The first and most practical step in serving our forestry interests would be to see that the produce of our existing forests will be utilised to the fullest extent and the efforts of the Board of Trade should be in that direction, rather than in the restriction of our markets and thus perpetuating the waste that has too long been permitted.

It is a fact that the output per acre of forest on the West Coast has increased 30 to 40 per cent. in consequence of the export trade taking a class of timber which was not marketable in New Zealand. Much could be done to encourage the use of inferior grades of timber in New Zealand in the same manner as they are used in Australia.

I know that the Hon. Minister is aware of the fact that a most important improvement has been devised by our well-known Joseph Butler, of Butler Bros., Ltd., which will prolong the life of white-pine. Mr. Butler's patent or device means that a butter box quite as good as the present butter box can be made from one-seventeenth of the timber heretofore used, and this without loss of efficiency. When we consider the importance of the butter box trade and the complete reliance of that trade upon white-pine, the value of device whereby the timber can be made to go seventeen times as far as heretofore must be apparent, even to the uninitiated. Improved facilities for manufacture and transportation will give higher value and a longer life to our existing forests and would be of more practical value than the restrictive measures which have lately been suggested.

Another aspect of the subject must not be lost sight of, and that is that ever acre of timber land