NOXIOUS WEED CONTROL FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF AN INSPECTOR

By - Mr. John Robinson, of the Rangitikei
County Council.

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In New Zealand, in the early days, hundreds of acres of bush were felled and burnt each year, and these areas had to be sown to grass. The demand for seed of any kind became so urgent that from Port Nicholson alone thousands of bags of seeds, being the residue of stock bedding and packing material found in the hold of ships, were transported inland by pack horses, and sold for the grassing of bush burns.

Plants commonly grown in England, where they showed no tendency to become troublesome, were introduced by the early settlers and missionaries; these included many plants such as sweet-briar, blackberry, periwinkle, barberry, foxglove and goatsrue. But under the New Zealand climatic conditions, and on virgin soil, these plants developed at a rate of growth never known in their country of origin. Blackbirds, thrushes and sparrows were also introduced and liberated, and these birds accelerated the spread of blackberry and sweet-briar by the widespread distribution of seeds.

Fencing was a difficulty in those early days; settlers were unable to obtain sufficient wire or even stones for walls so that some alternative had to be found. Consequently, gorse seeds were imported, and miles of gorse hedges planted as a substitute for fences. Within a short period of time gorse from untrimmed hedges, together with ragwort, foxglove, and other imported plants sown on bush burns began to spread. Thousands of acres of once ... productive country became heavily infested with these imported plants which today we know as noxious weeds - a situation brought about by improper farm management in those early days, or, to be more precise, the inability of the settlers to obtain adequate labour for maintenance.

As time progressed, and the population of New Zealand increased, certain Native lands were made available for lease to Europeans. These lands were the residues of areas not bought by the Crown and which under the Treaty of Waitangi could not be sold by their owners, but had to be retained as an equity for future generations.

Many of these leases were for periods up to 50 years, with a clause stipulating that at the termination of the lease the owner was not responsible for reimbursing the lessee for any money spent on improvements. To a large extent this accounts for the deplorable state in which we find most Native lands today. The lessee extracted everything possible from the land, but spent the bare minimum on maintenance and improvements. This policy, unfortunately, is still being followed today by Europeans occupying Native land under these terms.

Appreciating that the rapid increase of certain plants was fast becoming a menace to the whole country, numerous organisations approached the Government in 1907 in an attempt to find some solution. In the following year the first Noxious Weeds Act was passed, in which certain plants were declared to be noxious throughout New Zealand, and the Department of Agriculture was made responsible for administering the Act.

It is depressing to note that after more than 40 years of this Department's administration there appears to be little decrease in the spread of noxious weeds. This is not due to the inefficiency of Departmental officers, but to the multitudinous duties which they are expected to perform, together with an official restraining influence which to a certain extent debars them from administering the Act in a manner calculated to achieve results.

In my opinion, the whole responsibility for the administration of the Noxious Weeds Act should be handed over to County Councils, or to some properly constituted body. No effective control can be obtained until uniformity

of administration is established.

Early in 1935 legislation was passed enabling any local body, if it so desired, to assume responsibility for administering the Noxious Weeds Act, but without any remuneration from the Government. This step was in the right direction, but in the main was unsuccessful. A few county councils, not already overrun with weeds took over the administration of the Act, appointed their own inspectors, and at least made an attempt to control noxious weeds in their districts.

Other counties and local authorities adopted a different attitude, not without a certain amount of justification. They felt that over the past 40 years noxious weeds control had been under the supervision of the Government, which had failed dismally in its obligations. Now that the menace had become a national problem, the Government was attempting to pass on its liabilities to local bodies, but without financial assistance.

This was unfair to those local bodies which were attempting to control weeds. They required full co-operation of neighbouring counties, but each year acres and acres of weeds were allowed to seed along their boundaries without any adequate attempt being made to stem the infestation or punish offending property owners or occupiers.

Two of the largest counties in the North Island have been administering the Act since 1935 and have appointed their own inspectors whose duties are confined to noxious weeds, the inspectors being directly responsible to their councils. This allows the inspector to carry out to the best of his ability the policy adopted by his council without any individual restraint. No person is better acquainted with the circumstances relating to any individual farmer than the inspector, who at all times is in direct communication with the farming community of his district.

The farmer or occupier of land is given every consideration by the inspector who must comply with the provisions of the Noxious Weeds Act in every respect. No court will find for the prosecution, or impose any penalty, before all the facts from both sides have been placed before it. On receipt of a notice to clear weeds from his property, any occupier may appeal to the inspector or the county council if it is considered that the conditions of the notice constitute an unreasonable hardship. An application may also be made for an extension of time in which to complete the work. This extension is invariably granted if warranted by the circumstances.

The noxious weeds inspector consults farmers in his district, observes the methods adopted by the more successful and passes this information on to the less successful. An important task is collecting information on new spraying materials and passing this on to farmers who need advice about combating weeds. The inspector's success in this field, however, depends largely on the degree of co-operation extended by individual farmers, and their willingness to act on his suggestions.

The inspectors principal duty is to see that noxious weeds are cleared from the properties in his district. It is essential, therefore, that the entire resources of specialised branches of the Department of Agriculture, working as a team, be placed at the disposal of any inspector or organisation, for there must be a complete, unified system of weed control, together with a universal list of noxious weeds, before full control can be ensured.

The present Noxious Weeds Act has many defects and it should be completely overhauled, revised and condensed. Some sections are so worded that they are definitely ambiguous and utterly confusing, leaving loop-holes for astute solicitors. An inspector must be fully conversant with his duties, and he must also know something about Court procedure, but it must be recognised that he is not a qualified solicitor and cannot quote case law and other legal argument.

Many persons in authority have expressed the view to me, and possibly there are some at this conference who share the same opinion, that Court proceedings would never be a solution to the problem of noxious weeds control.

It is true that if the penalties imposed are so light that it is cheaper for the offender to leave the weeds on his property and pay the fines, results will not be achieved; but if heavy fines are imposed the worst offenders find it much more economical to rid their properties of weeds. These cases are usually reported in the press and from reading such cases the farming community realises that it has an obligation to fulfil. The result achieved by heavy fines is closer co-operation between occupier and inspector.

It is not my intention to explain methods employed in weed control. This subject has already been dealt with by many competent speakers. With many new materials becoming available I believe, however, that we are on the eve of a new era of effective control of noxious weeds. With the introduction of 2,4-D esters and salts, blowers, booms and low-volume nozzles, the work of an inspector is becoming more specialised. He must have a complete knowledge of all these implements and materials, their usages and percentages of application. Only by conducting trials at various stages of plant growth, and under the conditions existing in his particular district, can an inspector gain this knowledge. From my own experience I have formed the opinion that no set standard of application can be relied upon. In the Hawkes Bay County, for example, five per cent Agroxone dust used in the spring on variegated thistle has given practically 100% kill, yet the same application at the same period of the year in Rangitikei gives a very poor percentage kill. No doubt similar anomalies occur in treating other weeds in different parts of the country where climatic conditions vary.

Many interesting problems confront an inspector. Farmers in my district when using the knapsack or boom method of hormone spraying found great difficulty in determining which portion of the area had been treated, but after many trials with various coloured liquids, I discovered that Condyl's crystals dissolved in the spray ensured clear identification of the areas sprayed. The compound left a blotchy brown stain on the leaves of the plants, and did not appear to affect the killing-power of the spray.

The use of light aircraft opens up great possibilities for spraying hill country, provided they are employed with discretion and care. I would not like to see this system altogether condemned. Many farmers in the Rangitikei district are so situated that with foresight and co-operation they could adopt this method without any risk of damage to neighbouring crops or gardens through drift.

In conclusion, I would emphasise that before the Noxious Weed problem can be solved in this country a new policy of administration must be adopted. I earnestly hope that the present Minister of Agriculture, in his wisdom, will call a conference of noxious weeds inspectors, together with representatives of those counties which today are administering the Act. Various aspects of the Act could then be discussed with men who are fully acquainted with its ramifications, and in this way it may be possible to bring about a satisfactory revision, which would mean more effective control of the gravest problem facing production in New Zealand today.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

PROFESSOR McCASKILL: Congratulations on bringing the weed conference back to earth a little. Let us have the work of the experts, but let us occasionally have a little horse sense from the horse's mouth, as we have had today.

MR. ROBINSON said in reply to a question that the trouble with Native land was that there was no compensation for improvements when the lease expired.

PROFESSOR McCASKILL: Mr. Corbett, the Minister of Lands, said he had given instructions that no more leases are to be issued without some instruction for compensation for improvements.

MR. CONNOLLY: Speaking for the weed contractors, we have always found the Department of Agriculture, the Agronomy Division and the D.S.I.R. only too willing to pass on any information which they may have. I cannot understand the reference to lack of co-operation.

MR. ROBINSON: I get no information unless I ask for it.

Congratulating the Speaker on presenting a most provocative paper, the Chairman mentioned that in the July issue of the Department of Agriculture's journal it was stated that the Minister would be bringing down a new Noxious Weeds Act this session. It might give the answers to some of the things worrying the conference. He thought that if Mr. Robinson asked the Department for any information he would be given it willingly.

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