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NINTH PROGRESS REPORT

OF THE

ROYAL COMMISSION ON STATE FORESTS AND TIMBER RESERVES.

PASTORAL LANDS IN THE PARISHES OF CONNANGORACH,
MOCKINYA, DAAHL, AND TYAR, COUNTY OF LOWAN,

KNOWN AS THE

BLACK RANGE FOREST, UPPER GLENELG DISTRICT.

PRESENTED TO BOTH HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT BY HIS EXCELLENCY'S COMMAND.

By Authority:

ROBT. S. BRAIN, GOVERNMENT PRINTER, MELBOURNE.

PASTORAL LANDS IN BLACK RANGE FOREST.

PROGRESS REPORT.

To His Excellency the Lieutenant-Governor of Victoria

MAY IT PLEASE YOUR EXCELLENCY :

We, the members of the Royal Commission appointed to investigate the general question of forestry and forest control and management in Victoria, have the honour to present the following Progress Report :—

BLACK RANGE FOREST LANDS.

Area and Boundaries.

This tract of country is situated in the south-eastern part of the county of Lowan, and was scheduled as a permanent reserve for forest purposes by the late Surveyor-General and the Inspector of Forests in 1897. It contains an area of 73,470 acres, and is about 21 miles in length by 8 miles in breadth at its widest part, in the parish of Daahl, but towards its southern end, where the channel of the River Glenelg makes a bend to the west, it is only about 2 miles wide.

It is bounded on the south-east and south by the River Glenelg, on the west by the dividing line between Tyar and Yat Nat, as far as the northern limit of these parishes ; thence by a straight line commencing about 40 chains to the eastward, and running in a northerly direction to the south-west corner of allotment B in the parish of Connangorach. From the south-eastern corner of the adjacent allotment A, in the same parish, the northern boundary is formed by a straight line running to Norton Creek, and thence alienated lands in the parishes of Mockinya and Daahl form the north-eastern boundary as far as the starting point on the River Glenelg.

These lands have for a considerable period been occupied under long leases for the grazing of sheep. At present there are seven persons in occupation, the areas allotted to them being as follow :—

Block.	Acres.
K	7,500
L	10,000
N	20,370
O	13,050
P	11,000
Q	4,700
R	6,850
Total	73,470

In addition, there are in block K 10,104 acres, and in L 4,774 acres, of Crown lands outside the boundaries of the proposed forest reserve.

Timber and Soil.

Throughout the greater part of its length, the reserve is traversed by a ridge of hills of sandstone formation, known as the Black Range, the highest elevation of which is Mount Byron. On the western side, where the range slopes down to the plain, the soil is of very inferior quality, consisting of a poor sandy loam with a frequent outcrop of sandstone rock and schist, and covered with a stunted growth of stringybark,

white ironbark, box, and bullock. Stringybark is the prevailing tree on the range itself, but the northern portion, in block L, where sandy loam and barren drift-sand overlie the rock, has scarcely any useful vegetation, being covered with a miserable growth of dwarf stringybark, honeysuckle scrub, heath, and bayonet grass. Eastward of this barren ridge, in the direction of Brimpaen, both soil and timber improve, there being several hundred acres of loam, covered with a fair quantity of redgum and greybox.

On the eastern side of the Black Range as a whole, the greater part of the land is a sandy loam, but between the lower slopes or foot-hills and the channel of the Upper Glenelg (now dry, with the exception of some deep lagoons and water-holes at intervals), there are alluvial clay flats and marshy hollows of varying width, extending from a few chains to about a mile and a half from the river, and covered with large quantities of redgum, grey and yellow box, and white ironbark, in all stages of growth. There are also, at some distance from the river, isolated belts of loamy clay covered with redgum and box of fair quality. Some fifteen years ago six saw-mills were at work in the neighbourhood, cutting sleepers for the State railways, and it is said that very large supplies of this line material were obtained there. The best trees having been thus culled out, the mature timber now left is somewhat short-barrelled and stocky, but a great deal of it is of better quality than the redgum which millers and hewers have been utilizing for some time past in portions of the Barmah and Goulburn reserves. Taking into consideration only the mature redgum, greybox, and ironbark now available on these lands, the Inspector of Forests, during a recent visit, estimated that about 150,000 railway sleepers could be obtained there, and, after examining the reserve ourselves, we do not consider that this estimate is an excessive one. A great many of the redgum trees, however, are old and pipey, and we consider that facilities should be offered to millers and hewers to utilize these, as well as all mature timber, without delay.

Settlement and Grazing Rights.

On the 25th of January we received through the Minister of Lands a petition from residents of the district surrounding this forest asking that all Crown lands in the neighbourhood held under pastoral lease should be made available for selection as soon as possible. The petition proceeds—"The land, although otherwise represented as only fit for grazing a few sheep and harboring vermin, is really fit for the settlement of at least 200 families, and suitable for all kinds of rural industries." The bulk of the Crown lands in the district, with the exception of those at Rosebrook, are included in the pastoral blocks mentioned in this Report. The Rosebrook lands, in the county of Borung, form part of the proposed Grampians State Forest, and we hope to be able to inspect and report upon them shortly when we are dealing with that large tract of mountainous country.

During our recent inspection of the Black Range lands we took evidence at Brimpaen, near the north-east corner of the proposed reserve, and every opportunity was afforded to the petitioners as well as to representatives of the pastoral lessees to fully state their case. The original desire of the petitioners appears to have been to secure the subdivision of this area into allotments of about 640 acres with the right to the fee-simple, but, doubtless owing to the poor quality of the soil, most of them now appear to have in view larger blocks of 1,280 acres on long leases, several of which might be taken up by members of the same family and occupied in conjunction for sheep grazing. This would, obviously, be merely a modification of the system in vogue under the Land Acts 1890-91, under which lands in the pastoral class containing areas of 7,500 acres and upwards, have been leased for long terms, but it is very questionable whether it would result in the settlement of "200 families," or, indeed, a tenth part of that number.

That this idea of obtaining pastoral blocks of several thousand acres on the Upper Glenelg by means of family selection has attracted the petitioners rather than a desire for close settlement, is shown also by the report of a Special Land Board which sat at Horsham on the 27th and 28th of September last, by direction of the late Minister of Lands, for the purpose of hearing the applications of the present pastoral tenants for a renewal of their leases, and the reasons advanced by the petitioners in opposition to such renewal, when some 80 witnesses were present. The Board, consisting of a Land Officer, the authorized Surveyor of the district, and the local

Crown Lands Bailiff, arrived at the conclusion that the petitioners desired an alteration in the existing system of leases "so as to place areas of 3,000 or 4,000 acres within the reach of settlers and their families who are now in possession of small areas of good and fair land in the vicinity, which they might work in connexion therewith," and, after weighing the evidence and inspecting the land, the members expressed the opinion—"That settlement would not be promoted, nor the land better utilized in small grazing areas, which could not exceed 1,280 acres, . . . and that "the excision of certain portions as grazing areas would probably result in the greater part of the inferior land falling back into the hands of the Department, and thus involve State outlay in the destruction of vermin." For these reasons, they recommended the renewal of the pastoral leases.

These are the opinions of a departmental board, arrived at after careful inquiry into all the circumstances, and, while we cite them, we do not think it necessary to comment on them at any length. Our province is to advise what public lands in the colony should be reserved and protected for forest purposes, and in view of the fact that the only valuable areas of redgum now left to the State in the western district are in the Victoria Valley, and in this portion of the valley of the Glenelg, and that there is already, after some 60 years of settlement, a serious shortage of this fine hardwood, we feel it our duty to recommend the retention as a timber reserve of these Black Range Crown lands, with the exception of the northern portion, defined on the plans as pastoral blocks K and L. Owing to the very limited quantity of timber of commercial value on these blocks (17,500 acres) we cannot advise their retention as forest, and, therefore, recommend that the northern boundary of pastoral block N be made the northern boundary of the reserve. The reduced area to be dedicated for forest purposes will thus be about 56,000 acres.

The question of grazing rights in any forest must necessarily be subordinate to the protection of the useful timber. Although the crest and slopes of the Black Range bear large quantities of inferior stringybark and bastard box, it must be borne in mind that this long ridge forms the watershed of a considerable tract of country, and for this reason alone should be preserved under forest cover. We have not seen in any other district poorer grazing land than that which is found along the eastern slopes of the range. To keep the whole area under occupation and at the same time to enable selectors to occupy blocks of 1,280 acres with advantage to themselves, the boundary lines of the blocks would have to run as at present from the river up to and across the range. This would result in narrow oblong allotments, with a small proportion of alluvial flat, and a far larger proportion of rough and almost barren scrub land. To graze sheep on such small areas with profit would necessitate the ring-barking of the timber and the clearing of the land; but, although the privilege of destroying useless timber and scrub is often granted to holders of ordinary Crown lands, it cannot be given in the case of State Forests or Timber Reserves, any improvement of which must be carried out by the Conservator and his staff. After journeying through most districts of the colony, and seeing immense tracts of our best hardwoods, such as redgum, red ironbark, and greybox ring-barked on Crown lands occupied under licence or lease, we have come to the conclusion that occupiers who are desirous of securing a better growth of grass cannot be trusted to distinguish between valuable and useless timber.

Having carefully considered the natural features of this tract of forest, and the necessity of strictly preserving the redgum areas on the alluvial flats, as well as the box and white ironbark on the slopes, we desire to record our opinion that in any future disposal of the grazing rights of the reserve, whether such rights be granted under licence or lease, care should be taken to allot the several blocks of land in areas of sufficient size to enable the occupiers to carry on the grazing of stock profitably, while strictly complying with the covenant of their licence or lease in regard to the preservation and protection of the live timber thereon.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS.

The following is a summary of the recommendations made in this Report:—

1. That the area known as the Black Range Forest, distinguished by vertical red lines on the new county plan of Lowan, be retained by the State as a Timber Reserve, with the exception of 17,500 acres in the northern portion.
2. That the said 17,500 acres, being the bulk of pastoral block L and the eastern part of pastoral block K, be excised from the reserve.

3. That in any future grant of the grazing rights of this reserve, whether the same be made under licence or lease, care be taken to allot the several blocks of land in areas of sufficient size to enable the occupiers to carry on the grazing of stock profitably, while strictly complying with the covenants of their licence or lease in regard to the preservation and protection of the live timber thereon.

A. L. TUCKER, President.

J. BALFOUR BURTON.

DAVID HAM.

DAVID KERR.

G. J. TURNER.

Parliament House,
Melbourne, 7th March, 1900.