

1908.

VICTORIA.

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# PROGRESS REPORT

FROM

## THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON RAILWAYS

ON THE QUESTION OF

## RAILWAY COMMUNICATION WITH NETHERBY, KOW PLAINS, AND NORTH-WESTERN MALLEE;

TOGETHER WITH

## MINUTES OF EVIDENCE.

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*Ordered by the Legislative Assembly to be printed, 5th August, 1908.*

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EXTRACTED FROM THE VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE LEGISLATIVE  
ASSEMBLY.

THURSDAY, 14<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, 1907.

3. NETHERBY AND NORTH-WESTERN MALLEE RAILWAY.—Mr. Bent moved, pursuant to notice, That the question of connecting Netherby, Yanac-a-Yanac, Kow Plains, and the north-western portion of the Mallee country by means of a line of railway with the existing railway system, and of leasing the Crown and other lands enhanced in value by the construction of the railway, be referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Railways for inquiry and report.

Debate ensued.

Question—put and resolved in the affirmative.

MEMBERS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON RAILWAYS.

(*Eighth Committee.*)

The Hon. G. GRAHAM, M.L.A., Chairman ;

J. W. Billson, Esq., M.L.A.,  
The Hon. Dr. W. H. Embling, M.L.C.,  
P. McBride, Esq., M.L.A.,

The Hon. D. Melville, M.L.C.  
(Vice-Chairman),  
E. C. Warde, Esq., M.L.A.

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## PROGRESS REPORT.

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON RAILWAYS, to which the Legislative Assembly referred the question of connecting Netherby, Yanac-a-Yanac, Kow Plains, and the north-western portion of the Mallee country by means of a line of railway with the existing railway system, and of loading the Crown and other lands enhanced in value by the construction of the railway, has the honour to report as follows:—

1. The object of this railway proposal was to serve an extensive area of Mallee country, containing upwards of 2,000,000 acres, lying to the north of the Dimboola and Serviceton railway, to the west of Lakes Hindmarsh and Albacutya and the Outlet Creek, which is the extreme northern end of the Wimmera River, and to the east of the South Australian border. With the exception of a strip of settled country about 25 miles wide lying to the north of the Dimboola and Serviceton line, and about 50 miles long extending from the Dimboola and Jeparit railway to the South Australian border, the whole of this large area is in the hands of the Crown. Portions of the area are held under grazing licences, but such permits can be terminated at any time. Netherby and Yanac-a-Yanac are within 16 miles of the Dimboola and Serviceton railway, and are surrounded by a number of Mallee farmers, but the Kow Plains are 75 miles north of that line or about 60 miles from Yanac-a-Yanac. Kow Plains are about 55 miles west of Ouyen—a station on the Mildura railway—and 26 miles east of the South Australian border. The South Australian Government has built a railway branching off the Serviceton and Adelaide main line at Tailm Bend and terminating at Pinnaroo within 3 miles of the Victorian border and about 29 miles west of Kow Plains. Evidence was taken by the Committee at Nhill, Netherby, Jeparit, Rainbow, Hopetoun, Pinnaroo, and Ouyen regarding the country to be served by the proposed railway. In addition to that, the Committee inspected the land at Yanac-a-Yanac and Netherby and also the country lying between Pinnaroo and Ouyen, spending three days examining the lands around Kow Plains, Boundary Tank, portion of Pine Plains, Underbool, Walpeup, and Tiega. At the instance of the Committee the Government sent a party consisting of Mr. A. S. Kenyon, Engineer for Agriculture; Mr. C. E. Campbell, engineer of the Construction Branch of the Railway Department; and Mr. D'A. T. Harvie, surveyor of the Lands Department, to make a close examination of the country extending from Netherby and Yanac-a-Yanac northwards to Kow Plains, and report on its suitability or otherwise for settlement and cultivation. These officers stated that the country comprising the 2,000,000 acres proposed to be served by the suggested railway varied very greatly in quality, and the evidence of other witnesses, as well as the observations of the Committee when driving through the Mallee, confirmed that statement. Messrs. Kenyon, Campbell, and Harvie reported that the Mallee country from the edge of the existing settlement near Netherby and Yanac-a-Yanac, bordering on the 36th parallel and extending northward between the South Australian border and Outlet Creek to the southern boundary of the Kow Plains run was of such inferior quality that it was practically a desert and unsuited for settlement. "Small patches of possible land (*i.e.*, land which might be made fit for occupation) occur here and there," they said, "but to such a small extent as to practically prohibit the construction of a railway through it for the service of the Kow Plains area." They added that the land surrounding these good patches was of such a loose, sandy nature that carting wheat over it to a railway would be "a most costly work." Mr. Kenyon, in his evidence, described this inferior country, which covers about 800,000 acres, as consisting almost wholly of sand heath, and that fully 75 per cent. of that area was

Description of  
the country.

unfit for settlement under any sort of conditions, not only because of the poverty of the soil but the sandy surface would be blown away if the heath growing on it were burned off and the ground cultivated. Mr. Arthur Scott, who some years ago held a grazing lease over the greater part of this inferior country, informed the Committee that he had been many times across the country between Outlet Creek and the South Australian border, and had also been to Kow Plains and Pine Plains. He confirmed the statements of the Government officers regarding the very inferior quality of the land extending from a few miles north of Yanac-a-Yanac to the south end of Kow Plains run. His description of the country was that it was practically "all white sand covered with heath, with high sand hills running across it, and was useless for settlement." He remarked that "a man could not make a living at all in that country. We foolishly thought it could be done, and we are wise now after the event." Other witnesses who had been over this poor country at various times also spoke of it as being unfit for settlement. On the other hand, they and the three officers mentioned stated that the country from Kow Plains to Ouyen was practically all suitable for settlement and most of it fit for cultivation. The visit of the Committee to Kow Plains, Underbool, Walpeup, and Tiega confirmed their statements as to the better quality of the land there. Therefore the Committee is of opinion that if a railway were made to Netherby or Yanac-a-Yanac it would be unwise to extend it northward to Kow Plains through 50 miles of such inferior country as has been described. Under these circumstances the Committee resolved to separate the question of railway communication with Netherby and Yanac-a-Yanac from that of railway connexion with Kow Plains and the North-Western Mallee. It has asked the Railways Commissioners to furnish it with estimates of revenue and working expenses of a railway to Netherby and Yanac-a-Yanac, starting from Nhill, and also of a line branching off the Dimboola and Rainbow railway at Jeparit, and proceeding westward to Netherby and Yanac-a-Yanac. When these estimates come to hand the Committee will report on the question of railway communication with those places.

Proposed extension of Rainbow or Hopetoun railway.

2. Evidence was heard at Rainbow and Hopetoun concerning the proposed extension of the railways terminating at those towns in a north-westerly direction to Pine Plains, and on to Kow Plains. It was represented that along each of these rival routes there was fair mallee land fit for settlement, and that at Pine Plains there was a large area suitable for cultivation. Another proposal placed before the Committee was that a line to Kow Plains should branch off the Mildura railway at Turriff, about 30 miles south of Ouyen, and run westward through some splendid mallee country at Patchewollock and across the north end of Pine Plains. The Committee, however, was compelled to set aside all these proposals for reaching Kow Plains, as, after passing Pine Plains and Wirrengren Plain, there would be a belt of sandy country 8 miles in width to pass over on the way to Kow Plains. As the Committee drove over this very inferior belt, and also over the route of the proposed line from Ouyen to Kow Plains, it has no hesitation in declaring that the latter route will serve more good country, and will cost less to construct and maintain than either the suggested line from Rainbow or the one from Hopetoun. Mr. M. E. Kernot, Chief Engineer for Railway Construction, was of the same opinion. In his evidence before the Committee he said—"I approve of the extension from Ouyen because it opens up the largest area of good land at the least cost. I look on the extension from Ouyen as being the best one to make at present." Nevertheless, as there are some patches of good land at Brambrook, Wonga, and Patchewollock, in addition to the large area at Pine Plains, the Committee considers that the question of railway extension to Pine Plains should be further inquired into and dealt with as a separate reference.

Ouyen to Kow Plains route.

3. Going westward from Ouyen for a distance of 17 miles towards Walpeup the country is nearly all good, consisting of some large open mallee, with extensive areas of Mallee pine interspersed with grassy plains. This good land extends from about 10 or 12 miles north of the track from Ouyen to Walpeup to about 15 miles south of it, and embraces the areas known as Tiega and Yellangip. On the 142nd meridian there is a block of from 20,000 to 25,000 acres of the finest country in the North-Western Mallee. It is called Walpeup, and consists of low, pine ridges and grassy plains covering an area 8 or 10 miles long in a north and south direction, and from 3 to 4 miles wide. Proceeding west from Walpeup the country is not so good, occasional sandy ridges covered with porcupine grass and very light mallee, which denote the inferior quality of the land, being met with. These bad

patches, however, are not, on the whole, extensive. Approaching Underbool, which is 12 miles from Walpeup, there is an improvement in the country, the mallee being larger and denser, with pine ridges here and there. From Underbool to near Kow Plains—a distance of about 25 miles—there is, north of the track between those places, an extensive belt of good mallee country, which was stated to be all suitable for settlement and wheat-growing if the rains come at the right time of the year. On Kow Plains, and also on some of the land bordering on the track from Boundary Tank to Kow Plains, there are outcrops of limestone which render it unfit for cultivation. To the west of Kow Plains there is another wide strip of fair country, but on passing through it the soil again becomes of inferior quality, the limestone frequently appearing on the surface. Approaching the South Australian border the country improves, being of fair quality, but scattered throughout this area are small patches of limestone. Apart, however, from the land on the west side of Kow Plains being inferior on the whole to that on the east, the Committee is of opinion that no additional settlement would be encouraged by carrying the railway from Ouyen further west than Kow Plains, as any wheat grown more than 12 or 13 miles west of the latter place will in all probability be carted across the border to Pinnaroo, a distance of 16 or 17 miles, as that railway station is but 162 miles from Adelaide, compared with about 345 miles from Kow Plains *via* Ouyen to Melbourne. The Committee was informed at Pinnaroo that if the mallee land on the Victorian side of the border were made available for occupation in blocks of from 640 to 1,000 acres it would be promptly applied for, as an underground supply of water suitable for stock purposes had been found there by boring to a depth of 230 feet, the water rising in the bore from 40 feet to 50 feet and being pumped to the surface. The average size of the holdings around Pinnaroo is from 800 to 1,000 acres, though there are a few farmers holding less than 500 acres who work entirely on their own land. The quality of the land determined the size of the holdings. Altogether about 11,000 acres were under crop last season at Pinnaroo. It is about three years since the land around that township was first occupied. The average yield of wheat last season was about 11 bushels. In one instance a yield up to five bags was obtained from fallowed land, but in another where the land had not been fallowed it was next to nothing. The rainfall at Pinnaroo during 1907 reached 13·80 inches. It was stated that most of the rain fell during the growing period of the wheat crop—from April to November. In 1906 the rainfall totalled 15·10 inches, but in 1905 it was only 10·22 inches, when an average yield of 7 bushels of wheat was reaped from land which had not been previously cropped or fallowed, being virgin soil. As a rule the rainfall diminishes as it goes eastward. The total registered at Ouyen in 1905 was 11·10 inches; in 1906, 14·20 inches; and in 1907, 11·87 inches. It is estimated that the average annual rainfall around Kow Plains is 14 inches, and at Walpeup 13 inches, which is considered by Mr. A. S. Kenyon, Engineer for Agriculture, to be sufficient for wheat-growing provided the land is fallowed and properly worked.

4. The Committee considers that it does not come within its function to make any recommendation concerning the size of the allotments into which the Kow Plains and Walpeup country should be divided, that being a matter of policy to be determined by the Government. Nevertheless, the Committee deems it to be its duty to refer to the evidence placed before it regarding this matter. Witnesses who had been cultivating mallee land at Pinnaroo and Ouyen expressed the view that if persons put on the Kow Plains country were to become permanent settlers, the allotments should not be of less area than 640 acres where the land was of good quality, and up to 800 or 1,000 acres where it was of fair or medium quality. Farmers who appeared before the Committee at Hopetoun, Rainbow, and Jeparit all favoured the allotments being of from 800 to over 1,000 acres, according to the quality of the land. When asked to give his views on this question, Mr. A. S. Kenyon, Engineer for Agriculture, said—“I think the minimum area a settler should have of the Mallee country to make a comfortable home for himself and family, whether good or inferior country, should be about 1,000 acres. I take that view, not on account of the productiveness of the soil and the amount per acre required to support a family, but the size of farm required for the economical use of the most economical plant and horse teams a farmer can use. . . . It is not possible under fallowing and cheap production conditions of wheat in the Mallee to work a farm with less than nine horses. That means a six-horse team for heavy work, and a three-horse one for the lighter operations of drilling and harrowing. A farmer must also have the necessary stump-jump ploughs,

harvesters, drills, and other implements. It would require 1,000 acres to keep them employed, say, ten months in the year, ploughing, harrowing, drilling, harvesting, and carting. . . . With a less area, it would not be possible to keep the teams mentioned in anything like a reasonable amount of work. If smaller teams be employed, and smaller ploughs and smaller implements generally, the wheat will cost more to produce, and to harvest; or if the larger teams and larger implements be used on a smaller area, they would be idle a considerable time of the year. . . . I do not think a man with 300 or 400 acres only would be able to keep himself, using the large teams and large outfit; and with a small outfit, the diminution in profit would be sufficiently serious to probably cause a failure."

5. Mr. Kernot, Chief Engineer for Railway Construction, informed the Committee that the survey of the line from Ouyen to Kow Plains was in progress. The line would be about 56 or 57 miles in length, with a ruling gradient of about 1 foot in 75 feet. More than half the line had been surveyed from the Ouyen end, and as he believed the Kow Plains end would prove to be no more difficult from an engineering point of view than the section between Ouyen and Underbool, he estimated the cost of the proposed line at £2,550 per mile, or a total outlay of £145,000, if new 60-lb. steel rails were used, and at £2,250, or an expenditure of £128,000, if constructed with serviceable second-hand steel rails. At that price the line would have to be unfenced at the start, and have the minimum equipment as regards station accommodation. A reduction of about £60 a mile might be made in the cost of the line by putting in a grade of 1 foot in 40 feet, but having regard to the great difference in the load that could be hauled over a grade of 1 foot in 75 feet, he thought it better to adopt the easier grade at the outset. This estimate, he added, was high compared with the cost of constructing other Mallee lines, but the difference was accounted for by sleepers being dearer, the earthworks heavier, wages being higher than a few years ago, greater provision having to be made for a supply of water, and, as the district was more inaccessible, arrangements would have to be made to provision the men. The cost of the rolling-stock sufficient to meet the requirements of the line for the first two or three years from the opening would be about £5,000. He stated, in reply to a question why the Kow Plains line had not been surveyed from a point on the Mildura railway further south than Ouyen, that if that had been done it would have been necessary to cross several sand hills, and the cost of construction would have been considerably higher. Moreover, the northerly route starting at Ouyen would serve a larger area of land, which could be used to advantage, and there were also better catchment areas for water supply along that route. Further, at Ouyen an area had been reserved by the Lands Department for a township, and it was favorably situated for that purpose, and seemed likely to become the business centre of that part of the Mallee.

6. It is estimated that the proposed railway from Ouyen to Kow Plains will serve 768,000 acres of Crown lands, of which 750,000 acres will be available for settlement after allowing for a reserve of 3 or 4 chains on either side of the railway track; and for roads, water reserves, and sites for townships.

7. The Committee is unanimously of opinion that it would be a serious mistake to construct a railway into the Underbool and Kow Plains country until proper provision had been made for a sufficient supply of water for domestic and stock purposes, either by tapping an underground flow or by making large public tanks in various parts of that country. Boring for water is being carried on under the supervision of Mr. A. S. Kenyon, Engineer for Agriculture, a few miles on the Victorian side of the border, and supplies suitable for stock and domestic purposes have been obtained at a depth of about 200 feet. There are indications that this underground supply will extend east as far as Kow Plains, and possibly even on to Walpeup. These boring operations, however, should be hastened on as fast as possible. In any case, the Committee considers that it would be a step in the right direction to excavate two or three public tanks in the Walpeup and Underbool country before next autumn to conserve the winter rains, even if their value is subsequently lessened by the tapping of an underground supply.

8. No estimates of the annual revenue and working expenses of the proposed railway from Ouyen to Kow Plains are furnished with this Report, because the country is at present unoccupied, and both the receipts of the line and the train service necessary to meet the requirements depend, of course, on the settlement which

Cost of proposed  
Ouyen to Kow  
Plains railway.

Land available  
for settlement.

Water supply.

Estimates of  
revenue and  
working  
expenses.

takes place in this part of the Mallee. There is, however, the broad fact that all the railways constructed in the Mallee, with the exception of the one to Mildura, have become paying lines, and the receipts on the Mildura railway are improving each year. In order to insure freight for the proposed railway, and to discourage the land being held for speculative purposes, the Committee is of opinion that the persons to whom allotments in this country are granted should, within two years of obtaining permission to enter into possession of the land, be required to have at least one-fourth of their holding cleared and ploughed, and that failure to comply with this condition should cancel the licence or lease.

9. The Committee recommends the construction of a 5ft. 3in. railway from Ouyen to near Kow Plains, a distance of about 57 miles, at a cost of £145,000, if new 60-lb. steel rails have to be used. The Committee has been informed that about 50 miles of serviceable second-hand rails will most likely be made available by the Railways Commissioners in the early part of 1909, owing to some of the main lines being re-laid with heavier rails. Should such rails become available, the Committee relies on the Construction Branch of the Railway Department using them, so as to keep the cost of constructing the line from Ouyen to near Kow Plains down to the lowest point, having regard to the economical maintenance and safe working of the railway. A further expenditure of £5,000 will be necessary for rolling-stock. This recommendation is made subject to the land enhanced in value by the building of the proposed line being liable to pay annually for a period not exceeding twenty years a railway deficiency rate to meet the loss resulting from the construction and operation of the line and the expenses connected with the collection of the rate. Such rate is to be levied on the acreage basis, and is to vary in amount according to the quality of the land and the distance of the holding from the nearest railway station or siding. When the Crown lands between Ouyen and Kow Plains are made available for settlement it should be made clear to the applicants that, in addition to paying for the land, they will have to pay an annual railway deficiency rate till such time as the line becomes a paying one.

Recommendation.

GEO. GRAHAM,  
Chairman.

Railways Standing Committee Room,  
State Parliament House, Melbourne,  
4th August, 1908.

[*Minutes of Evidence are not printed.*]