

1918.

VICTORIA.

R E P O R T

FROM

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE
ON RAILWAYS

ON THE

EASTERN MALLEE CONNECTING RAILWAYS;

TOGETHER WITH

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE AND PLAN.

Ordered by the Legislative Assembly to be printed, 24th September, 1918.

By Authority:

H. J. GREEN. ACTING GOVERNMENT PRINTER, MELBOURNE.

RAILWAYS STANDING COMMITTEE REPORT No. 1.—[9d.]—13959.

EXTRACTED FROM THE VOTES AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY.

TUESDAY, 12TH MARCH, 1918.

8. EASTERN MALLEE CONNECTING RAILWAYS.—Mr. Wynne moved, pursuant to notice, That the question of connecting the districts lying between the Ouyen to Mildura railway and the Murray River from Piangil downwards with the existing railway system by means of railway extensions and the provision of adequate water supply for domestic purposes 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.

(Twelfth Committee.)

J. MENZIES, Esq., M.L.A., Chairman ;

*The Hon. S. Barnes, M.L.A.
The Hon. J. W. Billson, M.L.A.,
The Hon. A. Hicks, M.L.C.,

The Hon. D. Melville, M.L.C.
(Vice-Chairman),
R. H. Solly, Esq., M.L.A.,
†R. F. Toutcher, Esq., M.L.A.

* Ceased to be a member on becoming a responsible Minister of the Crown, 21st March, 1918.

† Appointed 27th March, 1918.

APPROXIMATE COST OF REPORT.

Compilation.*	£	s.	d.
Printing (400 copies)	6	10	0

* The compilation was a portion of the work of the Secretary of the Railways Standing Committee, who is paid by annual salary.

REPORT.

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON RAILWAYS, to which the Legislative Assembly referred the question of connecting the districts lying between the Ouyen to Mildura railway and the Murray River from Piangil downwards with the existing railway system by means of railway extensions and the provision of adequate water supply for domestic purposes, has the honour to report as follows :—

DESCRIPTION OF COUNTRY.

1. Beyond the areas served by the broad-gauge railway to Piangil, which is the terminus of the Kerang-Swan Hill line, and the 5 ft. 3 in. railway to Manangatang, the terminus of the Boort-Ultima line, there is a large unoccupied area of undulating Mallee country extending to within 3 miles or so of the Murray River frontage, where the low-lying box flats, mostly subject to inundation by river floods, are met with. This Mallee country is, roughly, 16 miles from north to south by 30 miles in width, and contains slightly over 300,000 acres. To the south-west of this area are about 100,000 acres of similar Mallee country which will be served by the Kulwin railway now being constructed. Of the 300,000 acres referred to fully 90 per cent. is suitable for settlement and wheat-growing. It is computed that approximately 140,000 acres of new country will be commanded by the proposed extension of the Piangil railway and 160,000 acres by the Manangatang extension. Almost the whole of the land is in its natural state, and is being reserved for the settlement of returned soldiers who either had farming experience prior to enlisting, or will qualify at an Agricultural College to occupy these lands. The country is generally of good second-class quality, except in the northern portion, in the parishes of Yungiera, Nenandie, and Margooya, towards the Murray frontage, where there are ridges of sandy land running from west to east. Small sand ridges were crossed in other parts of this large area, but they are neither wide nor long, and are not so bad as not to be worth clearing and bringing under cultivation. The soil for the most part is good red or grey loam, the former prevailing in the flats, and the latter on the gentle slopes. Here and there some limestone rubble appears on the surface, but such land is small in extent. A few plains, each of 50 acres or so, were met with, and on several of these water tanks had been excavated and drains cut to lead the rainfall into them by the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission or by those who formerly held the grazing leases of the blocks.

2. In the eastern portion of the area intended for settlement most of the land is covered with the ordinary mallee, about 10 or 12 feet in height, with undergrowth consisting of wire, hop, and turpentine bushes. Porcupine or spinnifex grass is growing on the sand ridges. Very little mallee pine was seen in this part; but in the western portion, in the parishes of Winnambool, Geera, and Walle, belts of pine, large mallee, and belar were passed through. Taken as a whole this country is uniformly good and, in the opinion of the Committee and also of the Surveyor-General, is well suited for settlement and wheat-growing. The latter stated that in his opinion 75 per cent. of the 300,000 acres was second-class land and the remainder third-class. This area compares favorably with the Mallee country to the south which was made available for occupation a few years ago, and which is now producing fair crops of wheat, enabling the settlers there to gain a comfortable living from their holdings.

CONDITIONS OF SETTLEMENT.

3. Good earth roads can be easily obtained by avoiding the sand hills as much as possible in subdividing the land. It is the intention of the Lands Department to survey the roads and grub them for half their width before making the land available for occupation, so that intending settlers can readily inspect the country thrown open for settlement and be assured that they will be able to cart from their holdings to the nearest railway station by the easiest route. The expense of clearing these roads will be added to the capital charge for the land, and as both combined will not exceed about £1 per acre and will be payable in annual instalments extending over 40 years or so, these payments will not be burdensome to the soldier-settler. He will not be called on to make any rent or survey payments during the first three years of occupation, these being postponed till later on to enable him to get some return from the land before requiring any instalments of the purchase-money or survey fees to be paid. In addition the returned soldier-settler will be entitled under the Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act to a monetary advance up to £500 to aid

him in erecting a dwelling on his allotment, clearing the land, putting it under crop, and in purchasing a team, agricultural implements, and other necessary plant. The Committee was informed that the area of the allotments would be from about 640 to 900 acres, according to the quality or classification of the land, thus providing for the settlement of from 400 to 500 returned soldiers; and that in cases where a settler is physically unfitted to perform rough, heavy work, but is able to drive a team and thus do ploughing, harrowing, harvesting, &c., the mallee scrub on his allotment will be rolled down for him, and a charge made against his advance to cover the cost of clearing the land. It was, however, urged by the Repatriation authorities it was not desirable that too much improvement should be made prior to the soldier-settler going on the land, so as to enable him to earn money by making these improvements himself.

SITES FOR IRRIGATION SETTLEMENTS.

4. Bordering on the Murray River down stream from Piangil are two suitable sites for irrigation settlements. The first is an area of pine country with friable, red, loamy soil nearly opposite the junction of the Wakool River with the Murray River. It is about 16 miles by road from Piangil, and contains from 1,500 to 2,000 acres. The other site is the Bumbang Peninsula opposite Euston. This area contains about 42,000 acres, and has the Murray River on its east, north, and west sides. It is from 25 to 30 miles north of Manangatang. The soil is also a friable, red loam of good depth and well drained, being admirably adapted for irrigation. This country is classified as first class. It was formerly timbered with pine, belar, and large mallee. But a fair area has been cleared of the timber, having been brought under cultivation by a former grazing lessee who was given permission to grow wheat on the land. The grain was carted to the Murray River and taken by steamers to Swan Hill and Echuca.

5. Both these sites are being withheld by the Lands Department from occupation by settlers pending large storages being constructed on the Upper Murray River above Albury to provide a reliable supply of water for irrigation. During the drought of 1914-15 this stream almost ceased flowing in the summer months, and sufficient water to even partly irrigate the dairy farms, orchards, and vineyards at Swan Hill, Nyah, and Mildura could not be pumped from the Murray River. It is therefore considered inadvisable to establish additional irrigation settlements on frontages of that stream until a permanent supply of water by means of storages higher up the river is provided. Consequently, there is no intention at present to extend either the Piangil or Manangatang railways to these irrigable sites, which are not included in the area of 300,000 acres set aside for settlement by returned soldiers.

DOMESTIC AND STOCK SUPPLIES OF WATER.

6. Evidence was heard by the Committee as to the likelihood of an underground supply of water for stock and domestic purposes being obtained in the Piangil and Manangatang districts. Mr. A. S. Kenyon, Engineer, State Rivers and Water Supply Commission, stated that mainly in the years 1886 to 1891 several bores were put down in the Eastern Mallee country to depths of from 500 to 1,100 feet, mostly reaching bedrock, which was either granite or silurian schist. These bores cost about £20,000, and were unsuccessful in tapping any reliable artesian or underground supplies of water suitable for stock or domestic purposes. Mr. Kenyon said:—"If any underground stock water exists it would be at such depths as to cause it to be many times more costly in working than a channel system, whether by gravitation or pumping."

7. Mr. Kenyon explained, on behalf of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission, that supplies of water for domestic and stock purposes will be brought by gravitation into the Piangil and Manangatang districts by means of narrow, open channels connecting with the Wimmera-Mallee system, which obtains its supply mainly from Lake Lonsdale. This water will come through Donald, and thence by means of the Wycheproof-Goschen channel into the Swan Hill-Ultima country and on into those portions of the Piangil and Manangatang districts awaiting settlement. This supply will be brought from the eastward, and consequently it is the desire of the Lands Department to settle the Piangil district first, otherwise the water channels to the Manangatang district will have to be carried for 12 or 15 miles through unoccupied lands before they can be made use of. Provision is to be made for pumping water from the Murray River at Nyah by means of the irrigation plant on the bank of that stream in case it may at any time be necessary to supplement the supply from Lake Lonsdale or none being obtainable from that storage basin. Supplies raised by pumping usually cost more than those coming by gravitation from storages. At no time, however, has the Murray River been so low in the winter months as to prevent a stock and domestic supply being obtained from it by pumping. The main and subsidiary water channels intersecting the Piangil and Manangatang districts will be made by the

State Rivers and Water Supply Commission. Each settler will have to provide on his allotment, on the site marked out by the Commission's surveyor, ample storage provision, say a tank or tanks of at least 2,000 cubic yards capacity, as these outside sources of supply will be delivered only once a year, and then in the cool or winter months, so as to lessen the loss by soakage and evaporation as much as possible. It is not practicable from the point of view of the economic use of the water, or from the financial side as to the cost of supply, to give two supplies of water in the year to each allotment. Each settler, in addition to providing a storage tank, must make the channel from the main or subsidiary channel to take the water on to his holding.

8. The estimated cost of surveying and making the main and subsidiary water channels in the Piangil and Manangatang districts is £75,000. It is anticipated that on the average a water rate of from £10 to £12 per annum per square mile will have to be paid by the land-holder to make the scheme remunerative, including the expense of maintenance and supervision of the channels, distribution of the water, and management charges. Included in the outlay of £75,000 is the cost of excavating large public tanks on water reserves in suitable localities scattered throughout the country. These are to give the new settlers a supply within reasonable cartage distance of their holdings prior to water from outside sources being brought into the district by means of channels, and also to afford a local storage for use in times of drought.

RAINFALL AND WHEAT YIELDS.

9. Records which have been kept for the last 30 years at towns or sheep stations surrounding this Mallee area of 300,000 acres showed that the average annual rainfall may be put down at close on 13 inches, which, while being lower than on any other part of the Mallee yet settled, except at Yatpool and Carwarp, near Mildura, is considered to be sufficient for successful wheat-growing, provided the land is properly ploughed and fallowed when it is cleared and the recognised rotation system is followed of having one-third of the holding under crop, one-third under fallow, and one-third under grass in turn each year. As a rule, about 60 per cent. of the annual rainfall occurs in the wheat-growing months. In South Australia, just over the north-west border of Victoria, wheat-growing has been successfully carried on for several years with a rainfall in the crop-growing period equal to that occurring in the Piangil and Manangatang districts.

10. In the 1915-16 season, when the country immediately around Piangil and Manangatang was newly settled and brought under cultivation, the yields of wheat averaged 8 and 7 bushels respectively; in 1916-17 they rose to 12 and 13 bushels; but in 1917-18 the yields fell to 10 and 8 bushels in the respective localities in consequence of the preceding wet summer preventing good stubble burns and the mice interfering with sowing. In a few instances, however, where the land had been well worked and the crop properly put in from 15 to 18 bushels per acre were harvested.

ROUTES AND COSTS OF PROPOSED RAILWAY EXTENSIONS.

11. Mr. M. E. Kernot, Chief Engineer for Railway Construction, informed the Committee that the proposed extension of the Manangatang railway had been surveyed in a northerly direction along the Euston-road, terminating near Bryden's Tank, which was about 14 miles from Manangatang and 20 from Euston, and about 11 miles from the southern boundary of the Bumbang land which is withheld from selection, being regarded as a suitable area for a future irrigation settlement. He explained that, owing to war conditions prevailing, the cost of construction at present would be high for a Mallee railway. For instance, new 60-lb. steel rails, which were formerly supplied at £1,000 a mile, could not be purchased now for less than £1,500 a mile, according to the latest quotations he had obtained. The cost of other materials, such as sleepers, building timbers, iron-work, &c., had also advanced, and the rates of wages paid to labourers had likewise been increased. His estimate for a light broad-gauge line from Manangatang to Bryden's Tank was £55,461 for 14 miles 14 chains, or £3,911 per mile, exclusive of land and rolling-stock. If, he said, serviceable second-hand rails become available this cost would be reduced by £500 or £600 a mile. The principal items comprising the £55,461 were £22,770 for new rails; £7,200 for sleepers; £7,869 for earthworks; £3,713 for ballast (sand) and metal or gravel for station grounds and platforms; £1,250 for fencing and cattle pits; £2,170 for station platforms, buildings, and residences for railway employees; £3,210 for engineering, supervision during construction, and general expenses; £2,641, being 5 per cent., for unforeseen contingencies. This extension would have a ruling gradient of 1 in 75. Mr. Kernot stated that, in compliance with the wish of the Railways Commissioners, the length of the platforms at each station would be 300 feet, to enable the loading of small consignments into the truck at the front of the passenger carriages and also into the guard's van at the rear of the train to be done at the same time, and thus avoid delays at stations. The buildings and other equipment at stations had been cut down to the minimum.

12. The proposed extension of the Piangil railway would be in a north-westerly direction to Pine Tank, which is about $15\frac{3}{4}$ miles from Piangil and nearly 9 miles south of the landing on the river at Narrung. This railway at present prices was estimated to cost £62,400, exclusive of land and rolling-stock. Its ruling gradient would be 1 in 75. In this case also if serviceable second-hand rails become available the estimated cost would be reduced by £500 or £600 a mile.

13. After inspecting the country the Committee considers that the routes of these extensions as surveyed will fairly divide the 300,000 acres to be settled and will serve the requirements of the settlers, besides allowing suitable sites for townships to be obtained adjacent to the terminal points of the lines. In this view it is supported, not only by Mr. Kernot, but also by Mr. A. B. Lang, Surveyor-General, and Mr. A. S. Kenyon, Engineer of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission. The stations should be placed on well-drained ground, so that teams carting in wheat will not get bogged when approaching the grain-stack sites; and, if possible, the stations should be so located that a supply of water for stock purposes can be carried by gravitation to them, thus allowing teams after bringing in their loads to be watered there.

COMPETITION OF RIVER STEAMERS WITH RAILWAY.

14. When the question of extending the Swan Hill railway to Piangil was under consideration a few years ago the likelihood of steamers trading on the Murray River between Echuca and the junction of the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers competing with that railway extension was inquired into. It was then pointed out that the Murray River, except during an occasional season, was at too low a level for navigation from about the end of December to May or June following. Consequently, when the wheat crops were harvested in January the grain could not be got away by steamer, and would be railed from the Piangil district to Melbourne if the railway were extended as proposed. Moreover, the rate for the carriage of wheat by rail from Piangil to Melbourne would, if a "local" railway rate were charged, be about 4s. a ton less than the combined charges by steamer to Echuca and rail from there to Melbourne. At the same time, it was admitted that some of the merchandise, such as groceries, drapery, &c., carried at the higher rates on the railways might be conveyed by steamer from Echuca to Piangil when the river was navigable, as the combined rail and boat charges in those instances would be less than direct by rail from Melbourne to Piangil.

15. Experience has proved the correctness of these statements. The estimated outwards goods traffic over the Piangil extension in the first full year of operation was 13,661 tons, and the inwards 2,309 tons. The actual traffic was as follows:—1915–16, outwards, 13,245 tons; inwards, 4,311 tons; 1916–17, outwards, 20,921 tons; inwards, 4,409 tons. Although the railway from Chillingollah to Manangatang is not subject to river competition, the figures showing its progress are nevertheless interesting. This line was opened in 1914, and in consequence of the drought in 1914–15 the estimated outwards traffic of 7,350 tons and the inwards trade of 920 tons were not reached. In 1915–16, however, the outwards traffic totalled 9,726 tons, and the inwards 1,934 tons, while in 1916–17 the outwards traffic advanced to 15,612 tons, and the inwards to 2,331 tons; or in each case more than twice the estimated trade for the first year of operation. This is a fair indication of the effect which railway facilities in the Mallee have on the production of that country.

16. The Committee, when in the district recently, again looked into the question of river competition with the proposed railway extension. It was assured that even when the Murray River is locked, and thus rendered navigable at any time of the year, the railway will get all the grain traffic, owing to its rate (13s. 4d. per ton) being much lower—now that "local" railway rates have been abolished—than the combined steamer charge to Echuca and rail charge thence to Melbourne, which would be 23s. 4d. per ton. The combined rate for the carriage of greasy wool by river to Echuca, and thence by rail to Melbourne, would be 66s. 9d. per ton, exclusive of insurance, as against 59s. 6d. all the way by rail. There was, however, a likelihood of the steamer obtaining the carriage of some of the high-rate goods, such as groceries, drapery, &c.; but the probability of that competition was reduced, owing to the terminus of the proposed railway extension—Pine Tank—being a few miles further away from the river than either Nyah or Piangil, thus necessitating some additional cartage expense.

LAND RESERVED FOR RETURNED SOLDIERS.

17. As already stated, the unoccupied Crown lands in the Piangil, Manangatang, and Kulwin districts which are regarded as suitable for wheat-growing are to be reserved for the settlement of returned soldiers. The 300,000 acres in the Piangil and Manangatang districts, together with the 100,000 acres or so around Kulwin, which is to the west of Manangatang,

and is now being connected by a 5 ft. 3 in. line with the railway system at Nandaly, will be sufficient for the settlement of some 500 soldiers in allotments averaging about 700 acres each, after allowing for roads, water reserves, and sites for townships or villages. The Honorable F. G. Clarke, Minister of Lands, who is administering the Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act, stated, when giving evidence before the Committee, that a Qualification Committee had been constituted under that Act, and they went "into the question of what class of farming the returned soldiers are accustomed to and had best be put to. I learn from analyses they have made that some 8 per cent. of the successful applicants for certificates are especially qualified for wheat land, and if this ratio remains constant there will be some 500 returned soldiers who will have to be provided with wheat farms. As the land repatriation of our soldiers is likely to cost the State some £5,000,000, the Government is very desirous to avoid buying privately-owned and expensive wheat farms. They would rather develop Government land, which will cost them considerably less, and will also open up new areas of cultivation. My reports go to show that the area northwards of Piangil and Manangatang is the most suitable Mallee land remaining in the State, and I am very anxious to see extensions of the Piangil and Manangatang railways carried out."

MODEL VILLAGES.

18. The Minister of Lands further stated that one of the hardships which settlers in the Mallee in the past had to contend against was isolation, due to the residences being built a mile or so away from one another. This had a depressing effect, especially on the wives of settlers, and also interfered with the children obtaining the necessary schooling. He added he proposed to remedy this drawback as far as practicable, by endeavouring to induce the settlers to reside not on their allotments, but in groups in model villages, comprising sixteen or so residences, along the railway lines adjacent to the stations, and along the water channels. Each dwelling would have behind it an accommodation paddock of 30 or 40 acres, in which to keep a cow, light horse, and the farm team when not working or grazing on the farm allotment. Under this proposal no settler would reside more than 4 or 5 miles from his farm, and when constantly working his farm lands, such as at fallowing, seeding, and harvesting time, he could leave his team and implements on the farm, to avoid taking them to and fro daily, and return home each evening by means of a light horse or bicycle, or he could live in a "humpy" on the farm, and go home at week ends only during the busy season. There would, the Minister said, be a certain amount of elasticity about the proposal, so that if a settler preferred to live away by himself he would be at liberty to do so.

REPORT OF TRAFFIC OFFICER.

19. Mr. R. Kellway, Special Traffic Officer of the Railway Department, who visited the district to report on the country to be served by the proposed railway extensions and the probable traffic over them, stated that the area tributary to the Piangil-Pine Tank extension was 164,000 acres, exclusive of roads, reserves, and lands on the Murray River frontage subject to flooding. Of this acreage 93,672 acres have been subdivided into allotments, the balance not yet being surveyed into holdings. He described the settled country within about 10 miles west and a similar distance north-west of Piangil as being mostly fair, third-class Mallee land, with occasional patches of red sand. The unsettled country further north-west towards the terminus of the proposed railway at Pine Tank was, he said, patchy in parts, but, generally speaking, quite equal to the average light Mallee country, the greater portion being classified as second class. He added that, continuing in a north-westerly direction towards the Murray River, the parishes of Koorkhab, Wandown, and Yungiera consisted of light country, with patches of red and yellow sand with growths of small mallee, hop bush, turpentine bush, and spinnifex. The greater portion of these parishes he set down as fair third-class country. The soil in the parish of Narrung is, he stated, mostly a rich red loam. In the subdivided area tributary to this extension blocks had been allotted to 10 returned soldiers and men who are still on active service and to 40 other settlers. None of the former were residing on their allotments, and only 11 of the latter, the remaining 29 being absentees. One soldier had made sufficient improvements, 4 insufficient, and 5 had done nothing to their holdings. Of the 29 absentee civilian settlers 4 had made sufficient improvements, 16 insufficient, while 9 had left their allotments untouched. These soldier and civilian settlers held a total area of 35,632 acres, leaving 81 allotments, totalling 58,040 acres, which had been subdivided still available for settlement. He assumed that by the first year after the line is opened for traffic 35 additional soldier settlers will have occupied holdings in this area, the rate of settlement being restricted owing to the land being reserved for returned soldiers. As the idle and insufficiently-improved allotted

holdings are a harbour for rabbits, he suggested that if these allotments are not sufficiently improved after a reasonable time they should be forfeited and made available to other intending settlers. The average yield of wheat for the counties of Tatchera and Karkaroo during the past ten years, namely, 7·2 bushels per acre, had been taken as the basis in computing the production and traffic of the district. The outwards traffic of the proposed Piangil extension in the first year of operation was estimated at 4,483 tons, mostly wheat and mallee roots for firewood, and the inwards at 1,370 tons, comprising groceries, stores, fencing wire, and fertilizers. He put the area tributary to the suggested Manangatang extension to Bryden's Tank down at 250,000 acres, of which 109,628 acres have been subdivided into 143 allotments. Of these 16 had been taken up by returned soldiers, and 10 by other settlers. These 26 allotments are in the parishes of Winnambool and Myall, which contain, Mr. Kellway stated, 46,000 acres of "specially good wheat land." He considered that about 40 per cent. of the tributary area which has been subdivided, or approximately 50,000 acres, is inferior third-class country, and of the balance about half is second-class and half third-class land. He estimated that when the railway is opened to Bryden's Tank there will be 50 additional settlers in this district, making 76 in all. In his opinion the returned soldiers settled in this country "should, with reasonable energy on their part, become successful settlers." He thought that for a time the applications for these Mallee lands "will be somewhat limited, but at the close of the war there will be a keen demand for Mallee land." Mr. Kellway closed his report by saying:—"The work performed by some of the returned soldiers at Winnambool and Myall gives reasonable justification for assuming that the returned soldiers will be as successful as ordinary settlers." The outwards tonnage in the first year of operation of the railway to Bryden's Tank was estimated at 3,775 tons, and the inwards at 1,221 tons.

ESTIMATES OF REVENUE AND WORKING EXPENSES.

20. The Railways Commissioners furnished the Committee with the following estimates of revenue and annual charges, including working expenses, for the proposed extensions, providing for a bi-weekly train service on each:—

PIANGIL TO PINE TANK.

Annual Charges.

Interest at 5 per cent. per annum on £65,650, being cost (£62,400) of constructing 16 miles of 5 ft. 3 in. railway from Piangil to Pine Tank, at a wage rate of 10s. per day for labourers, with £3,250 added for truck rolling-stock	£3,282	10	0
Traffic expenses	139	15	10
Maintenance charges	1,280	0	0
Locomotive expenses, including repairs and renewals of rolling-stock	508	1	8
General charges	48	3	11
Total annual charges	£5,258	11	5

Revenue.

	On New Line.	On Other Lines from New Traffic from New Line.	
Passengers	£119 13 4	£118 12 4	
Parcels	25 0 0	.. .. .
Mails	13 12 3	.. .. .
Class goods	74 2 10	56 0 4	
Live stock	14 1 8	21 13 2	
Grain	69 17 5	606 16 0	
Timber and firewood	44 12 3	316 13 5	
All other traffic	10 0 0	.. .. .
	£370 19 9	£1,119 15 3	£1,490 15 0
Estimated loss first year of operation			£3,767 16 5

MANANGATANG TO BRYDEN'S TANK.

Annual Charges.

Interest at 5 per cent. per annum on £58,461, being cost (£55,461) of constructing 14 miles of 5 ft. 3 in. gauge railway from Manangatang to Bryden's Tank, at a wage rate of 10s. per day for labourers, with £3,000 added for truck rolling-stock	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	£2,923	1	0
Traffic expenses	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	119	10	9
Maintenance charges	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	..	1,134	0	0
Locomotive expenses, including repairs and renewals of rolling-stock	455	8	8
General charges	42	14	6
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Total annual charges	£4,674	14	11

Revenue.

	On New Line.			On Other Lines from New Traffic from New Line.										
Passengers	£100	12	5	..	£231	16	2				
Parcels	25	0	0	..	..	..	..
Mails	13	12	3	..	..	..	..
Class goods	58	10	4	..	58	14	7				
Live stock	15	17	2	..	40	5	1				
Timber and firewood	37	19	0	..	309	9	0				
Grain	52	16	0	..	474	19	9				
All other traffic	10	0	0				
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				£314	7	2		£1,115	4	7	..	£1,429	11	9
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Estimated loss first year of operation	£3,245	3	2			

VIEWS OF THE COMMITTEE.

21. The Committee considers a right step is being taken in utilizing the unoccupied lands to the north of Piangil and Manangatang for the settlement of those returned soldiers who have had previous experience in wheat-growing, or have qualified at an Agricultural College for farming pursuits, though it has been shown in many instances that such experience is not essential to become a successful settler in the Mallee. Much depends on the man and his industrious habits. On the whole, the soil of these lands is as good as that around Piangil and Manangatang and south thereof, on which settlers are producing each year fair crops of wheat, and making a comfortable living. The only drawback to this new country is that it has a slightly less average annual rainfall than the Mallee districts already occupied. But experience in localities in South Australia having a similar rainfall, and with a soil no better, if as good, has proved that if the land is fallowed and worked on modern methods, this defect can be largely overcome, and the country rendered as productive as that having a somewhat higher average yearly rainfall. The necessity for the adoption of these up-to-date practices in cultivating, working, and sowing the land points to the need of the Government exercising some slight, tactful supervision over the settlers in the first few years of occupation, so that the best results may be achieved from the land, and the energies of the settlers prevented from being expended in unproductive directions. If the settlers should in the early stages of occupation of this new country have the misfortune to encounter a season of drought—and there is always the probability of that occurring in the Mallee—it will be necessary for the Government to come to their assistance, aiding them by small loans to tide over the bad year, so that their settlement on these Crown lands may become permanent and the production of the State thereby increased.

22. Although the foregoing figures furnished by the Railways Commissioners show that both the proposed railway from Piangil to Pine Tank and the extension from Manangatang to Bryden's Tank will result in a substantial loss in the first year of operation, as was the case with all other railways extended into the Mallee, it must not be assumed that that loss will soon be reduced, and eventually disappear, as has occurred in connexion with most of the lines hitherto constructed in that part of the State. In the first place, this area, being reserved for returned soldiers, will necessarily be slow of settlement, much depending on the duration of the war; and, consequently, there will not be that rapid production, giving a large freightage to the railway, that has usually resulted from the occupation by civilians of Mallee country further south. In the

next, it must not be overlooked that these extensions are likely to be built under war conditions, when the prices of rails and other materials are abnormally high, and at a time when the wages of labourers employed in railway construction have reached their highest level for many years. In addition to this, high rates of interest will have to be paid on the money borrowed for building these extensions. All these conditions will handicap the lines, and make it the more difficult for them to become payable undertakings. To keep the capital outlay down to the lowest only essential works will be carried out at present. Wherever equipment, station accommodation, and fencing can with safety be deferred it will be postponed till more advantageous times. When, as is now the case, new rails and other materials are so difficult and costly to obtain, the Committee considers that the requirements of existing railways and sidings should be closely looked into, to ascertain if there are any unused or little-used rails, &c., which could with profit to the Department be lifted and utilized on new lines which will develop fresh areas of production, and thus add to the traffic of the railway system. Any loan raised for constructional purposes should have a short currency, so that if money should become cheaper after the war the loan could be converted to one carrying a lower rate of interest, and thereby avoid new railways being burdened for years with a heavy interest load.

23. While admitting the loneliness of life too often associated with settlement in the back blocks of Victoria, and the necessity of bringing the occupants of those lands closer together, so that the schooling of the children and social conditions of the people may be improved, the Committee considers that the suggested model village system will in practice be found to have a limited application, owing to the disabilities which will arise through having the farm allotment in some instances 4 or 5 miles from the holder's residence. The area required in the Mallee to make a living is about 1 square mile, as part of the land must be fallowed and part thrown into grass every third year. In other countries, such as Canada, where the rainfall is greater, the holdings are much smaller, and, consequently, the association of village residences with farm lands a mile or two away at the most has not the same objection as those situated 4 or 5 miles distant. If the village proposal is not attainable or successful it would certainly be advantageous if holders of contiguous allotments, including those across the road, could be induced to erect the dwellings on their respective blocks adjacent to each other, so that the benefits of neighbourhood may be enjoyed. When these lands are made available for occupation care should be taken to secure compactness of settlement, as far as practicable, while giving the applicants some discretion in the choice of allotments. Complaints were made to the Committee when in the outskirts of the existing settlement that applicants had been permitted to select hither and thither, causing scattered blocks of unoccupied lands to be left, and these became breeding grounds for rabbits and wallaby, which destroyed the growing crops of neighbouring settlers.

RECOMMENDATION OF THE COMMITTEE.

24. The Committee recommends the construction of the proposed 5 ft. 3 in. railways from Piangil to Pine Tank, 16 miles, at an estimated cost of £62,400, and from Manangatang to Bryden's Tank, 14 miles, at an estimated cost of £55,461. It suggests that every effort should be made to find serviceable second-hand rails for these extensions, so as to lessen their cost.

25. The Committee also recommends that supplies of water for domestic and stock purposes be brought into the Piangil and Manangatang districts simultaneously with the settlement of the country, in accordance with the scheme outlined by the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission.

JAMES MENZIES,
Chairman.

Railways Standing Committee Room,
State Parliament House,
Melbourne, 20th September, 1918.

[*Minutes of Evidence are not printed.*]