PUBLIC LANDS.

According to the data furnished this commission by the land office there were on the 1st day of September, 1898, 364,000 acres of state land remaining unsold. Nearly all of this land is covered with forest and but a small proportion is reasonably fit for agriculture, although a considerable amount might be made so by proper drainage. Most of these tracts are rather scattered, it being a comparatively rare thing to find a considerable number of forties in a contiguous tract.

By far the greater part of these lands were obtained by the state under the swamp land act of 1850 and much of it is actual swamp. There are some school lands left, but very little university and agricultural college land. There is also a moderate amount of indemnity land. In addition there are in the state, outside of Indian reservations, nearly 500,000 acres of government land, subject to entry under the homestead law.

Heretofore it has been the policy of the state to dispose of its lands as fast as possible. As long as there was no provision made for the proper care of the forests covering most of these tracts, that was undoubtedly the wisest plan, for without such care the standing timber was sure to become a prey to fire and windfalls, without any benefit to the state. But if it is decided that there shall be in the future state forests properly cared for and protected, it would evidently be absurd to sell the small remnant of forest land still belonging to the people and afterwards purchasing new lands which have already been deprived of their merchantable timber and cannot furnish a revenue for a long series of years. Very little of these state lands will be purchased by actual settlers for agricultural purposes. The buyers will be lumbermen who will remove the merchantable timber and leave the denuded lands to become useless wastes, as so many thousands of acres of similar land have already been left. The proceeds of the sale of these lands are paid to the school and normal funds, and in part to the counties within the limits of which they are situated. Over the school lands the legislature has no control. The land commissioners, however, may withhold such lands from sale whenever they shall deem it expedient (Const., Art. X, Sec. 8.) Over the lands granted by the act of 1850, the legislature has practically unlimited control. This has been established by a long line of decisions in both the state and federal courts. The legislature has acted accordingly by devoting one-half of these lands to the support of the normal
schools, while the other half is given to the respective counties. It would be obviously unwise to deprive these beneficiaries of the revenues to be derived from these lands. But if one considers that most of them are now sold for less than their fair value, and certainly for much less than they will be worth in the future, it is evident that the beneficiaries would be the gainers if the sale were stopped entirely for the present. The pine and other merchantable timber on these lands is in such condition that good business policy demands its removal just as soon as feasible with due regard to transportation and marketing facilities. In all the mature woods the annual increase of material is about balanced by the annual decay. But under the conditions now prevailing in the state, fire, windfalls and the consequent damage by insects, destroy so much good timber every year that the loss cannot be approximately made up by the annual increase through natural growth. Consequently the state forests are suffering a constant deterioration. This process can be stopped in no way save by the removal, as soon as practicable, of the dead and down timber and such standing pine, at least as is in danger of destruction. The rational and business-like way of procedure would be to sell the timber which is to be removed without parting with the land. The logging should be done by the purchasers under the supervision of the state and with due regard to the reproduction of the timber by leaving a sufficient number of seed trees and guarding against fire. The proceeds of the timber sales should be paid over to the proper beneficiaries, and it is not unreasonable to expect that the latter would realize in this manner as large amounts as they now obtain from the sale of the fee. The lands, however, would remain the property of the state, and if properly cared for would in time produce a new revenue, far greater than the first.

The objection is sometimes raised to the maintenance of large tracts of public lands within a county that the development of the region is thereby retarded, and that the county loses the taxes which the land would yield if held by private parties. It needs no very complicated chain of reasoning to show that these objections are ill-founded and short-sighted. The development of all our northern counties has heretofore been based far more on the lumber industry than on farming. In all those districts where the soil is inferior this will continue to be the case. Even in the hardwood districts, where the soil is well adapted to agriculture, the disappearance of the forest industries would be a serious calamity. There are now dozens of cities and villages where the inhabitants have begun to wonder what will become of
them when the timber is gone and the mills close down. Everybody has seen settlements very prosperous ten years ago, which are now abandoned by almost all their former inhabitants. The lands which it is proposed to keep permanently in the hands of the state are of the kind which do not attract the agricultural settler. After the timber growing on them has been cut they will, if left to themselves, become wastes, and what will then be the fate of the villages situated in their midst? They will have neither the industries depending on the forests, nor the trade derived from a prospering farming country. Real estate and improvements will lose their value, and the inhabitants will have to move to regions where the people have better business sense. So it is clear that every measure which tends to put the forest industries on a permanent footing is of the highest benefit and absolutely essential to the continuous development of every county which has within it tracts of non-agricultural lands.

The objection based upon the supposed necessity of taxing these lands is equally short-sighted. Pine lands are productive of taxes only as long as merchantable timber is standing on them. Experience has shown that many owners of pine lands will not pay taxes on them after the timber is cut. Even if they did, the value of cut-over lands is so small that the revenue produced is hardly worth counting. On the other hand, a considerable tract of land, held by the state, properly guarded and managed as a forest should be, will produce a continuous revenue, part of which will in many cases go directly to the county. In addition the forest will, directly and indirectly, give employment to a large number of people who will pay taxes on property accumulated by them, so that in the end the county and town treasuries will receive much larger sums than they ever will under the present system.

If the sale of state lands is stopped entirely for the present it follows by no means that not another forty of state land should ever be sold. After a proper forestry administration has been established, one of its first duties will naturally be to examine the precise conditions of every part of the public domain. If it be found that any particular tract by reason of soil, condition or location, would be more economically used as a farm than as a forest, there is no reason why it should not be sold by the state.

The lands owned by the government are somewhat larger in extent than those of the state. They are substantially of the same character as the state lands. The greater portion of them will never be required by actual settlers for farming purposes. In the meantime the timber growing on them is liable to the
same process of deterioration and destruction as that on the state lands. It would obviously be desirable that the state obtain title to these lands so that they could be treated in the same manner as the state lands now owned by it. It seems reasonable to hope that Congress, if it sees that the state is prepared to manage these lands in a way which will preserve and improve the forests growing thereon, will prefer to cede them rather than have them remain useless. Every effort should therefore be made by the people of the state and its representatives at the seat of the federal government, to obtain for the state title to the government lands within her borders.

The combined areas of the government and present state lands would be a sufficient nucleus for a system of state forests. They would by no means be large enough for all future times, but they would be a good beginning.

THE DENUDED LANDS.

By far the most difficult part of the forest problem in Wisconsin is the question as to what shall be done with those large tracts now existing which have been denuded of the pine formerly growing on them, and now lie idle, subject to the ravages of the fire. The present condition of these tracts and their prospects for the future are ably treated in the Report on Forest Conditions. It appears that in their present uncared-for situation they are liable to a progressive deterioration of the soil. That most of them are capable, however, of restocking themselves with pine without expensive sylvicultural operations, provided fires are kept out, is just as certain. Some parts of these lands, of considerable extent in the aggregate, but small in proportion to the whole area, have already begun to restock themselves in this manner. The opinion which formerly widely prevailed, that white pine did not reproduce itself on areas where it has been cut off, but gave way to poplar and other inferior species, has been proven erroneous by observations both in this state and elsewhere.

While it is perfectly feasible to restock these lands with pine, it is quite as undeniably true that the bulk of them will not be so restocked as long as they are left to themselves. If no steps are taken towards a proper care these millions of acres will become wildernesses of scrub, covered according to circumstances with crippled aspen, runts of jack pine, dwarf oak, or even merely coarse grass and sweet fern. That condition they will remain in