

4 News

# Cattlemen defy high country ban

## Drovers demand right of passage

By **MATHEW MURPHY**

**MOUNTAIN** cattlemen face thousands of dollars in fines as they defied a State Government ban yesterday and embarked on an eight-day droving run of cattle through the Alpine National Park.

Six horsemen are taking about 12 cattle through the national park in protest against the banning of cattle grazing in the high country. They want the Government to come back to the negotiating table.

Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria spokesman **Charlie Lovick**, a fifth generation alpine grazer, has spent the past few weeks chasing half his herd of 150 cattle back into the state forest.

"I brought my cattle into the state park and they basically beat me into the national park," he said.

Around 500 head of cattle had been taken into permitted state forest areas before Christmas as mountain cattlemen had tried to comply with the ban, he said. But due to years of habit, at least half of each herd had wandered back over "an imaginary line" through the forest into the exclusion zone.

"There might be a couple of hundred head in the national park, with us working our butts off trying to keep them out."

Mr Lovick said he wanted the Government to approve a right of carriage way for the cattlemen to take cattle through the park.

"While we accept that we won't see cattle grazing again in the high country within the life of this Government, we want them to come back to the drawing board and give us a right of passage," he said.

The protest comes a day after Acting Premier and Environment Minister **John Thwaites** visited the national park, announcing a \$7.5 million funding package to restore bogs, remove weeds and feral goats.

Yesterday Mr Thwaites said that the cattlemen had a right to protest, but warned that they shouldn't break the law while doing so. Fines of \$1000 per head of cattle are enforceable.

"The vast majority of cattlemen are getting on with it," Mr Thwaites said. "Those who are protesting, that's their right, but they obviously shouldn't break the law or do anything that might damage what is one of our most beautiful parks."

Opposition Leader **Robert Doyle** said he sympathised with the cattlemen, who he said were protesting the only way they knew how. "While it is civil disobedience, is understandable because they have had their way of life terminated after 170 years," he said.

Mr Lovick said the drive will come to an end next weekend at the Rose River in Wangaratta.

The cattlemen fear a total ban on alpine grazing, including state parks. The Government strongly denied any such plan yesterday.

The Government is providing up to \$100,000 over three years to individual licence holders to shift their cattle back into nearby state forest areas.

Mr Lovick rejected comments this week by Mr Thwaites that the Government and cattlemen were now working well together.

Cattlemen were still seething over the Government "unfairly painting" them as "environmental vandals," he said. "We've never got over that and never forgotten."

With AAP