

Coalition: We'll put cattle back in

KEY POINTS

- Liberals pledge to return cattle to high country
- 4000 gather at annual get together
- Cattlemen call for pressure at the ballot box

By ROSALEA RYAN

VICTORIA'S Coalition partners will tear up bans on grazing in the Alpine National Park and return herds to the high country if voted into government in the state election this spring.

Senior Liberal and National parliamentarians made the "unequivocal" pledge to more than 4000 high-plains graziers and friends at the annual Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria (MCAV) get-together near Cheshunt last weekend.

Shadow Minister for Agriculture and Liberal Party leader in the Upper House, Philip Davis, of Sale, reiterated his party's support for the cattlemen in their campaign to win back grazing licences withheld by Labor last May.

"The Liberals have stood with you, the cattlemen, in this battle over high-plains grazing for 20 years now," Mr Davis said.

"We stood with you in the 1980s and in the new century we stand with you still.

"This is unequivocal - unequivocal.

"If the Liberals are elected on November 25 we will hand your grazing leases back."

Leader of The Nationals in Victoria, Member for Gippsland South, Peter Ryan, echoed Davis' commitment, saying the issue was a potential "vote-changer".



BANNED: Cattle have been grazed on the Bogong High Plains since the 1830s but have not been allowed back onto the high country since the bushfires of early 2003.

As the official line-up spoke, drovers on horseback guided a dozen or so Herefords, Poll Herefords and Black Angus - representing the three breeds most commonly run in Victoria's mountains - down a hillside and through a roped-off corridor to an area immediately in front of the stage.

Led by Member for Central Highlands and Opposition whip in the Legislative Council, Graeme Stoney, of Mansfield, MCAV president and former federal parliamentary candidate, Doug Treasure, of Stratford, and fifth-generation mountain cattleman and one of four MCAV vice-presidents, Charlie Lovick, of Merrijig, the droving party arrived to unanimous applause.

The herd comprised three separate mobs of cows and calves that had set off from

Dargo, Mansfield and Heyfield the previous week and followed traditional stock routes through the Alpine National Park to meet up at Wonnangatta Station in an act of civil disobedience described by organisers as a "symbolic protest drive".

Lovick's brother John finished the journey on the back of an 800-kilogram Hereford bullock named Johnny, prompting the quip, "If we aren't allowed to drive our cattle through the national park, maybe we can ride the cattle and drive our horses instead."

The protest was organised by MCAV members and the rural lobby group, Country Voice, formed to co-ordinate the Enough's Enough march by disenfranchised Victorian farmers to the steps of Parliament House in Melbourne last June.

"Continuous alpine grazing and access to these routes is the only way to maintain this iconic heritage," Mr Treasure said.

"When they took our licences away they took away 170 years of living heritage and stole our connection with the land.

"This isn't about money; it's about what we do."

In a series of impassioned pleas, speakers called on the crowd to make its feelings known at the ballot box.

"We have no option but to go political," Mr Treasure said.

"The political reality is we have a Labor government kicking us out and an Opposition saying they will put us back if they win government.

"There's only one thing to do, and that is to vote against the Labor government in November."

Mr Treasure said Labor had deceived cattlemen and the general public.

"The government backbench committee to look at the future of alpine grazing pretended to listen to us for 12 months," he said.

Stockwhip in hand, Mr Davis opened his address by referring to Premier Steve Bracks' call last week for state Opposition Leader Robert Doyle to "discipline" Stoney for his role in the protest ride.

Waving a copy of Saturday's Age newspaper, the front page of which told of human effluent polluting the Yarra River, he suggested Environment Minister John Thwaites "concentrate on cleaning up his own backyard" and "leave the Alpine National Park alone".

Three times he asked the crowd, "Who needs to be disciplined: Stoney or Thwaites?", to which it roared "Thwaites".