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Bid to end Alpine cattle standoff

By Jesse Hogan

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National parks officers will again talk to rebel mountain cattlemen in a bid to end a bitter dispute over a grazing ban in Victoria's high country, acting Premier John Thwaites said today.

A group of cattlemen - and Liberal MP Graeme Stoney - have been running small herds of cattle through the Alpine National Park in recent days, ignoring the Government's grazing ban.

None have been prosecuted by parks officials, although some had their details taken two days ago when they refused to turn the cattle around.

Mr Thwaites said parks officials' top priority was to protect the park from grazing.

"They are certainly seeking to ensure that damage is not done and the cattle graziers comply with the law," he said.

"People have a right to protest, but they shouldn't be breaking the law or doing something that could damage the park."

Mr Thwaites said most cattlemen had accepted compensation packages from the government, and stressed the ban did not cover the entire high country.

"We've always said cattle grazing is a good part of the Australian culture and it's continuing, but it's just not continuing in the most precious high country national park."

He also called on Opposition Leader Robert Doyle to ensure Mr Stoney, the upper house MP for Central Highlands, was not urging cattlemen to ignore the grazing ban.

"I don't think it's appropriate for a Liberal member of parliament to put himself in a position where he may be breaking the law. I couldn't say whether he is - that's a matter for Parks Victoria and the rangers to determine."

Three groups of rebel mountain cattlemen are following traditional, but now forbidden, stock routes through the park. They converged at the Wonnangatta Station cemetery earlier today.

The alpine park's chief ranger, Peter Jacobs, said the authorities had been aware the cattlemen had planned to push cattle illegally through the park.

The maximum fine for bringing an animal into the park without permission was just over \$1000, he said.

The muster is the first test of the Government's controversial ban on grazing cattle in the national park, an attempt to protect the alpine environment.

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