

# City protest

By PAUL SELLARS,  
DANIELLE LE GRAND  
and DAVID McKENZIE

## Farmers take anger to Spring St

**ANGRY** farmers will protest in Melbourne next week over the ban on alpine grazing and other grievances.

Thousands of farmers are expected to converge on Parliament House on June 9 in support of Victoria's mountain cattlemen, who were last week locked out of the

Alpine National Park by the Victorian Government.

But Victorian Farmers Federation president Paul Weller said the protest was also motivated by anger over a range of Victorian Government policies, from pest control and drought relief to road funding, water and the Child Employment Bill.

Disaffected groups will protest at the "Enough's Enough Rally"

under the banner of Country Voice.

The Government's decision not to renew grazing leases has sparked outrage among cattlemen, their supporters and farming groups.

The Federal Government has also condemned the ban and is seeking to overrule it through an emergency listing of the cattlemen's heritage under the National Heritage Act.

Third generation cattleman Chris

Stoney said the ban was "a kick in the guts" and it was time to rise up against the Government.

"One by one, it (the Government) is picking us off," Mr Stoney said. "The only way to tell this Government to pull its head in is to vote with our feet."

Mr Weller said farmers were sick of being ignored by the Government.

"The state has ignored us on

drought. We now have to have permits for ripping rabbit burrows. They have ignored us on wild dogs," Mr Weller said.

"The Child Employment Bill, (Port Phillip Bay) channel deepening has been put on hold (and) rail standardisation was a promise they never kept.

"They have refused extra funding for rural roads and (there is) a lack of funds for (the control) of weeds and feral animals."

- Continued Page 2
- Rule's View, Page 15
- Editorial, Page 16

# VFF

## Skiing impact simply ignored

By PAUL SELLARS

THE Victorian Government should look at the ecological impact of ski resorts if it is to ban grazing in the Alpine National Park.

That was the view of the Victorian Farmers Federation this week as it slammed the Government for locking mountain cattlemen and their families out of the park.

VFF north-east regional councillor Ian Lobban accused the Government of double standards by banning grazing on environmental grounds.

He said Victoria's ski resorts, while not technically in the park, were part of the same ecosystem and exerted significant pressure on the alpine environment.

Yet despite the Government's assertions about the damage to the park by grazing, there was no recognition of the ski industry's impact.

"If the Government is banning cattle on environmental grounds, I challenge them to consider: are they going to abolish skiing and dismantle all the infrastructure?" Mr Lobban said.

He also claimed that the ban would only increase pest animal and weed pressure on the park.

"If the Government was so concerned about environmental damage, it is a pity they didn't put the same effort into controlling a wide range of problems," he said.

He said wild dogs were



Other issues: wild dogs are a huge park problem.

becoming an even greater problem in the park and surrounding state forest because Government efforts to control them had been grossly inadequate.

The cattlemen had also been vigilant in helping to keep a check on weeds in the park and the grazing ban would merely result in the weed threat increasingly exponentially," he said.

"History has shown governments are incapable of properly managing Crown land, and taking the cattlemen out of areas like the Alpine National Park only results in those places becoming degraded with weeds," Mr Lobban said.

CSIRO alpine ecologist Dr Dick Williams said it was "legitimate" to raise the ski resorts issue in the wake of the grazing ban.

"It should force us as a country to think about the way we want ski resorts to be managed," Dr Williams said.

However, he said that this did not change the fact that cattle caused serious ecological damage to the park.

"I don't think the legitimacy of this (grazing) decision is in any way undermined because a potentially higher-impact activity takes place in ski resorts," Dr Williams said.

## Protest planned

• From Page 1

Last week, Federal Environment and Heritage Minister Ian Campbell initiated an emergency assessment of the Alpine National Park in a bid to have the cattlemen's presence in it protected.

He must make a decision by next week, after examining environmental and heritage evidence.

"There can be no doubt in any Australian's mind that the 170 years of Australians driving cattle up into the alps, letting them graze there and bringing them down again at the end of summer is an absolutely central part of the Australian story," Mr Campbell said.

The move won high praise from the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria, which has campaigned long and hard that alpine grazing is both environmentally sustainable and a vital part of Australia's heritage.

However, state Environ-

ment Minister John Thwaites, and even the Victorian Liberal Party, do not believe that the Federal Government can overturn the ban.

Mr Thwaites said he had "clear legal advice that the Federal Government cannot intervene and seek to force the State Government to renew cattle grazing licences".

In announcing the ban last week, Mr Thwaites said there was overwhelming scientific evidence that grazing damaged the alpine environment.

He said it was "incongruous" that park visitors could be fined \$2000 for damaging vegetation while cattle were free to "roam over these areas and destroy vegetation".

Mr Thwaites also said that because 10,000 cattle were licensed to graze in the state forest around the park, "there can be no suggestion that the heritage or culture values are going to be in any way removed".



# slams alpine plan

By PAUL SELLARS

THE Victorian Farmers Federation has launched a scathing attack on the Victorian Government over its decision not to renew grazing licences in the Alpine National Park.

VFF president Paul Weller claimed the Government had "succumbed to a radical ideological philosophy" by deciding to "sacrifice cattlemen to curry favour with radical environmentalists".

Mr Weller said the cattlemen had been an "important part of the alpine environment over



Paul Weller

many generations, protecting it from fire and pest weed infestation".

He said the cattlemen were vital to the proactive management of weed and pests and there was no evidence that the past 170 years of grazing had such negative impacts so as to justify the ban.

"The diverse range of flora and fauna that can be found in the alpine region is evidence of a sustainable grazing system," Mr Weller said.

Mountain Cattlemen Association of Victoria president Simon Turner also said the "textbook and urban-based theory" used to justify the ban

was in direct conflict with "on-ground experience-based knowledge".

However, alpine ecologist Dr Dick Williams said such claims flew in the face of the overwhelming consensus among the country's best scientists.

"The science has been done according to world's best practice; it's gone through the ringer in terms of being peer reviewed by fellow scientists," he said.

Dr Williams said exhaustive research had found grazing did not reduce the intensity of bushfires and there was no

evidence to show it kept weeds in check in the upper elevations of the high country.

He said the science underpinning the ban had been reviewed, and found to be 100 per cent accurate, by Sir Gus Nossal, one of the world's most respected scientists.

"It's almost as if there are two worlds out there, two completely different cultures," Dr Williams said.

"But I don't think any grazier would deny the benefits of science as applied to agricultural production.

"What's the difference between science directed at ... agricultural productivity and science that looks at the interaction between grazing and the environment?"

Dr Williams pointed to a report by the Australian Academy of Science published as far back as 1957, which called for an end to alpine grazing.

"If I had to say something on behalf of the scientific community, it would be that the science has now been listened to and acted upon," Dr Williams said.

## Grazing return not ruled out

By PAUL SELLARS

THE State Opposition has not ruled out attempting to overturn the Victorian Government's ban on grazing in the Alpine National Park if it wins office at the next election.

Both the Liberal Party and the Nationals say overturning the ban could be potentially difficult, if not impossible.

But Nationals leader Peter Ryan said: "If it's possible to return the licences in the future, we would love to do it."

However, Mr Ryan said, "once these decisions are made, people move on, compensation is paid, and it can be very difficult to reverse a decision of this nature".

"(But) we certainly don't rule out reversing the decision in the future," he said.

Liberals country spokesman Philip Davis said his party would consider overturning the ban but it was too early to know if it was possible.

"We would want to renew the licences ... but the difficulty of this is that it would require legislation and that would depend on us who had control of the Upper House," Mr Davis said.

"Most of the pundits don't expect we will."

Mr Davis said the capacity of the Liberals to overturn the ban also depended on a number of other factors.

"It would also depend on whether the cattlemen would want that and issues would need to be resolved about compensation arrangements as well."

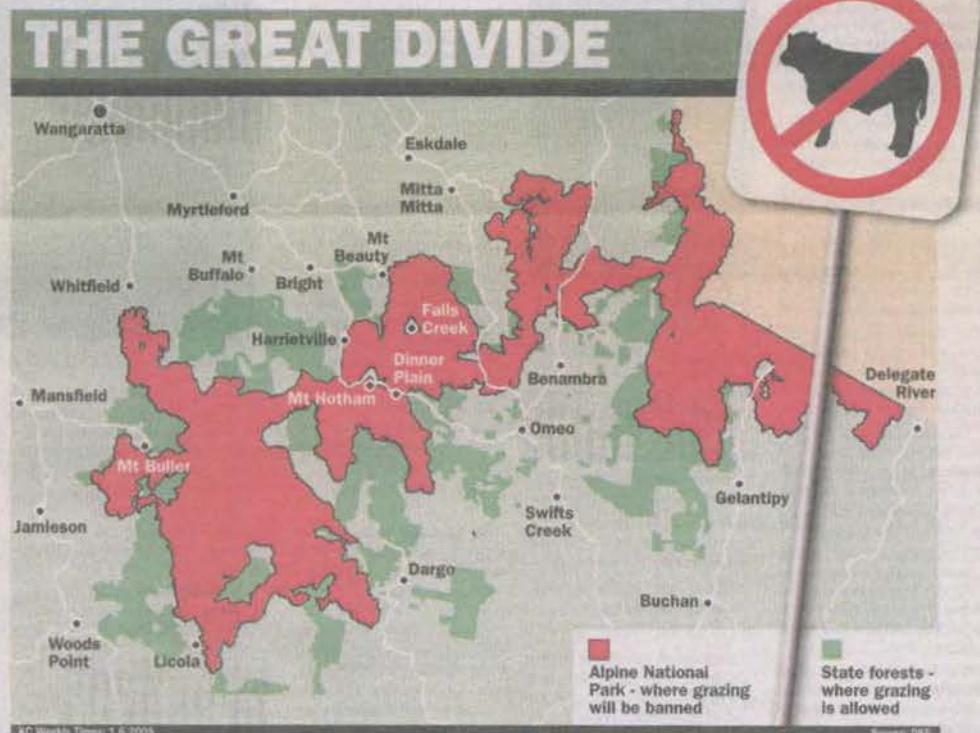
As part of the Government's decision not to renew licences, it has offered cattlemen \$100 for every head of cattle on their licence each year for three years, up to a maximum of \$100,000.

Mr Davis said the earliest possible opportunity to legislate in favour of the cattlemen would be in autumn 2007.

Therefore, the soonest that cattle could return to the park would be in the spring of that year.

Many things could change by then, the cattlemen may have "moved on", and it was impossible at this stage to say if letting them back into the park was practical or possible.

"We would do whatever we could to renew the licences and if that meant we had to introduce legislation, we would



certainly do that ... but subject to these difficulties," Mr Davis said.

Mr Ryan also said talk of overturning the ban was a "hypothetical issue at the moment and we are still fighting for the Bracks Government to

overturn its decision, which is an attack on 170 years of living cultural heritage".

"The Nationals have a long-held policy of supporting multiple uses of national parks — including cattle grazing where appropriate — as part of a

sustainable approach to managing public land," he said.

"We have supported the mountain cattlemen throughout this campaign and we continue to support them and the regional communities affected by this decision.

Mr Davis also said speculation on what might happen after the election was, in a sense, a distraction.

He said what was important now was attempting to force the State Government to back-down.



# Proud history fades

By DANIELLE LE GRAND

THE end of a tradition spanning 170 years has left Victorian high country cattleman John "Buff" Rogers shocked and devastated.

"We didn't expect it to be as bad as this," Mr Rogers said.

"We thought we might have had cutbacks, but we certainly didn't expect a total ban.

"It was a pretty big shock to us."

Mr Rogers, 71, lives at Wulgulmerang, an isolated area way off the beaten track at Black Mountain.

His property, Rockbank, is 1200ha and runs 350-400 cattle.

Mr Rogers' family started working the high country in 1903, and the four high country licences they hold includes MacFarlane's Flat — believed to be one of the first places in Victoria cattle were grazed (in 1835).

James MacFarlane founded what was probably the first cattle station in Victoria at Benambra.

MacFarlane's Flat is north of Wulgulmerang, about 3km south of the NSW border.

Mr Rogers said 40 per cent of his income came from national park grazing.

The family, including nephews and nieces, hold four Alpine National Park grazing licences, spanning about 80,000ha.

"The allocation is for 900 cattle, but we very rarely run that many. It is usually four, five or six hundred," he said.

The licensed area runs to the back fence of his property.

His property was hard hit by the 2003 fires that swept across the Alpine National Park, destroying fences and farm buildings, killing animals and burning historic huts.

"We have had two good kicks in the guts. One was from the 2003 fires — we were able to save this house, but we lost everything else. It will take us years to recover from that," Mr Rogers said.



Run ragged: John "Buff" Rogers is shocked and devastated.



No more: cattle graze in East Gippsland.

"Now we get another good kick in the guts from Mr Bracks, telling us we can't put our cattle in the high country. "It's devastating from a heritage point of view, and it will severely affect us financially."

Mr Rogers believes claims made about the environmental impact of the cattle in the mountains are exaggerated.

"They say it's in pristine condition. So I don't know where all the damage is."

Mr Rogers, who flew with a handful of mountain cattle to Canberra last week to meet with Federal Environment and Heritage Minister Ian Campbell, said he and others would continue to fight the ban.

# Couple blast decision

By DANIELLE LE GRAND

ENSAY cattleman Chris Commins believes the Bracks Government's decision to rip up Alpine National Park grazing licences is the thin edge of the wedge.

Mr Commins, whose family has been grazing cattle in the high country since the 1920s, said the Government had continued to shift the goal posts, and banning cattle grazing was likely to be just the first in a series of lock-outs.

Mr Commins and his brother, Bruce, are licensed to use a 4500ha run in the national park to graze 100 cattle.

They also have state forest leases.

He said the Victorian Government was hiding behind science, but he believed the cattle grazing ban was a "disaster for the environment".

"I can't quite comprehend how they can say there has been all this damage when (the cattle) have been there for 170 years," he said. "If it's pristine now, where's the damage?"

"You can't turn the clock back to the way it was before the white man came; you have to

By PAUL SELLARS

ONE of the Alpine National Park's biggest graziers says a virtual ban on grazing cattle in his licensed state forest area has added insult to injury.

Cobungra Station owner Mark Suhr has licences to run cattle in both the park and an area of state forest adjoining it.

Along with the other 44 farm operations with park licences, Mr Suhr learnt last week he would never again be allowed to take stock there.

But he has also been prevented from using his state

forest licences after being told if stock strayed into the park, he would have to remove all cattle for the rest of the season.

"Earlier this year I was told that I was allowed to use my DSE leases but that I couldn't use them unless I could give 100 per cent assurances that my cattle would not get into the park," Mr Suhr said.

"Because of this no-tolerance policy I am precluded from using my state forest leases."

Parks Victoria eastern regional manager Chris Rose said there was no such policy.

"We will be writing to Mark (because) it would be wrong of us to effectively ban him grazing his forest licences because his park licences have not been renewed," Mr Rose said.

However, a Department of Sustainability and Environment letter addressed to Cobungra Station manager Andrew Lawrence, written on February 18 and seen by *The Weekly Times*, states:

"It should be noted that if evidence is found of stock having strayed from the licensed area across Dinner Plain Track into the Alpine



Opposed: high country grazier Chris Commins and his wife, Jeanette.

manage change as best you can."

Mr Commins said the cattle-men were doing just that, and it was important to weigh up the positives and negatives of grazing.

He said exclusion plots on high plains showed the likely impact of a grazing ban.

"Inside the plots, all the snow grass has dominated; there was not one wildflower," Mr Commins said.

"Yet outside, where it has been grazed for over 100 years, there were umpteen different varieties of wildflower because they could see daylight.

"The big issue is Crown land management — the mountain

cattlemen are only a small part of it, but an integral part of it. It is just another tool that they (the Government) won't have to manage the country properly."

He said the notion that the high country licences — at a cost of \$5.50 per head of cattle each year — provided cheap agistment was wrong.

"You cannot compare us to commercial agistment on freehold country," he said.

He said animals on freehold country were on fenced land with improved pasture, did not have to be checked as often or have to be educated about the country.

He said a survey showed that it cost cattle producers using

high country land about \$3.60 a head per week, on top of government charges and rates.

Mr Commins' wife, Jeanette, said the effect of the ban would be felt across the community.

Mrs Commins said the loss of the high plains land, and a lack of freehold and leasehold land in the area, could lead to an exodus of young families, who were sharefarming with their parents.

She said these families relied on alpine grazing to generate enough income to support both generations.

Mrs Commins said the decision might mean the end of the Bracks' Government.

"We are getting sick of being kicked," she said.



# suffers king hit

National Park that you will be requested to remove all stock from the licensed area ... for the remainder of the 2004-05 season.

"Permission to graze this year is offered on the basis that your containment strategies must prevent stock from wandering, not merely detect them after the fact," the letter said.

Mr Suhr said to make matters worse, the strict requirements also prevented him from running cattle in his 250ha of freehold land embedded in the state forest.

"In the last few years I have gone through drought, bushfires and now the Government. It's a triple whammy," he said.

Mr Suhr said he had spent "several hundred thousands of dollars" repairing 60-70km of fence lines destroyed in the 2003 fires.

He also accused anti-grazing groups of running a "hate campaign" against him and attempting to create a myth that alpine grazing was now dominated by corporate interests.

Mr Suhr said he was not a "South Yarra computer soft-

ware mogul", contrary to media reports and a claim by Environment Minister John Thwaites.

Last week, Mr Thwaites said: "About 18 per cent of the cattle that are licensed are held by two commercial companies, a South Yarra IT company and a Sydney company."

Mr Suhr said he owned a house in the affluent Melbourne suburb but sold his computer business in the UK before returning to Australia seven years ago, and devoted much of his time to running Cobungra Station.



Triple whammy: station owner Mark Suhr.



Bill Bray

## Bray backs the ban

By PAUL SELLARS

THE Victorian Government's ban on cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park has received support from an unlikely quarter.

Cattle Council of Australia president and former Victorian Farmers Federation pastoral group president Bill Bray told *The Weekly Times* that he supported the Government's decision not to renew grazing leases.

But Mr Bray said he wanted to make it clear that he was speaking as an individual farmer and not as Cattle Council president.

"I just look at other environmental practices across Victoria and the way other producers are managing their environment, and that's where I believe the focus should be," he said.

Mr Bray said that in their own submission to the review conducted by the Alpine Grazing Taskforce, the cattlemen had proposed implementing an environment management plan.

But he said this should have been done years ago.

"The cattlemen are amazing people, but they should have put that in place some time ago," he said. "If they had, they would possibly still be grazing in the future."

Mafeking grazier and Victorian National Parks Association grazing committee member Tom Guthrie said the VFF did not speak for all farmers in its condemnation of the ban.

"It would be fair to say there is a very solid section of the farming community who opposes grazing," Mr Guthrie said.

Mr Guthrie said it was a commonly held view that mountain cattlemen were getting exclusive right to cheap agistment that was not available to other farmers.

## 'It's like a death in the family'

By DANIELLE LE GRAND

"IT'S like a death in the family and we can't even say good-bye."

That was the reaction of fourth-generation alpine cattle woman Sue Briggs to the Victorian Government's decision to ban cattle from the Alpine National Park.

The Briggs last took cattle to the high plains in late 2002, before devastating fires swept across the area in early 2003.

They say the Bracks Government's grazing ban will cost them their livelihood.

"They are killing the tradition of alpine grazing. All we have is treasured memories," Ms Briggs said.

In the 1880s and 1890s, Sue's great-great grandfather was the first of the Briggs family to graze cattle on the high plains.

The Briggs' alpine run now covers 1260ha, on the western side of Mt Jim, between Mt Hotham and Falls Creek.

They also have 162ha of freehold land at Everton, about 20km south-east of Wangaratta.



Sell-off: Ron Briggs is planning to cut his herd by up to 50 per cent.

But without the alpine land, their income will be cut 50 per cent.

The allocated number of cattle that can graze the licensed area is 136 "adult equivalent cattle", equal to 90 cows and calves.

With the high cost of land, Sue's father, Ron Briggs, said he would have to cut his herd by 40 to 50 per cent.

Mr Briggs said the cattlemen,

their families and local communities would continue to fight the ban, but would need the support of neighbouring industries, such as the loggers, and the urban community.

On the other side of the mountain range, people are shocked and angered by what they see as a city-centric Government's look-it-up-and-leave-it agenda robbing them of a 170-year-old heritage.

"Mountain cattlemen care for the high country," say stickers that adorn the windows of shops, petrol stations, motels and hotels in alpine towns such as Omeo and Benambra.

"High country horsemen immortalise the powerful and enduring symbol of Australian life," reads the tribute to mountain cattlemen Kevin Kelly posted by his daughter Billie on the Omeo bakery's walls.

"His love for the high country was in his veins."

Photographs of mountain cattlemen on horseback, droving cattle up high country tracks cover the walls of the Blue Duck Hotel, an isolated pub nestled in the mountains at Anglers Rest, north of Omeo.

The pub's patrons are furious about the ban, labelling it "despicable".