

Hats and horses do not win the war for the cattlemen

By ROBYN DIXON

A thousand people gathered on an obscure but beautiful stretch of rolling country called Watched Creek flat yesterday.

The made-for-television protest by the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria on the Bogong High Plains was stage-managed as relentlessly as a scene from 'The Man From Snowy River'.

Like the film, the scene had everything: plenty of emotion in the speeches of the organisers, horses and their riders carrying the Australian flag and descending the hill in a cloud of flies, old characters under battered Akubras — all choreographed to the tune of 'Waltzing Matilda'.

Families with old names like Faithfull and Treasure were protesting about the eviction of 11 cattle families from their mountain summer-grazing leases.

The association's president, Mr David Treasure, talked about "country that demands to be loved and understood just as much as it demands to be put to good use".

The issue, he claimed, was more than just protecting narrow grazing interests of a dozen families. But among all the rhetoric it was a little hard to extract exactly

what the Mountain Cattlemen's Association was on about.

Their enemies are "radical conservationists". Their allies are the Victorian Sawmillers' Association, the Chamber of Mines, the deer-hunting association, four-wheel-drive clubs, trail riders' associations and farmer organisations.

Mr Geoff Burrowes, who was responsible for yesterday's slick production, is a cattle farmer and the producer of the Snowy River films. He claimed the "radical conservationists" were pressuring the State Government to ban grazing on the high plains.

Mr Treasure claims the high plains would "revert to a wild unkempt mess" without cattle.

However the Minister for Conservation, Forests and Lands, Ms Setches, said the eviction of the families would exclude cattle from only five per cent of the land now available for grazing. Nor is there any plan to ban high-plains grazing in future, she says.

The Government wants to preserve a portion of the high plains in its natural state, she says.

Questioned about the involvement of saw-milling and mining groups in yesterday's protest, Mr Treasure said everyone ought to have "a right to come up into the

high country and not be locked out".

But all the hats and horses and drizabones have not won the propaganda war, as Geoff Burrowes admits few people have absorbed the cattlemen's message.

LEITH YOUNG reports that Mrs Setches called yesterday's rally emotive and selfish, and she accused the cattlemen of running an "exaggerated, movie-style campaign".

Disagreeing with the land areas being quoted by the cattlemen, Mrs Setches said they were putting out misinformation in an attempt to win the hearts and minds of Victorians.

She said plans to phase out grazing would remove cattle from about 17,000 hectares — about five per cent — of the most sensitive alpine areas. Eleven of grazing 100 families would be moved.

"The government wants to secure a representative sample of the high plains herbfields and healthlands free from the effects of cattle. That is reasonable."

Yesterday, four conservation groups, the Australian Conservation Foundation, The Wilderness Society, the National Trust and the Victorian National Parks Association, issued a statement supporting the Government's stand.