

Cattlemen ^{P5} saddle up for battle

Report Duncan Hughes

Victorian cattlemen have defied the state government by illegally herding cattle across the Alpine National Park, the latest move in their battle to overturn a ban on grazing in the state's national parks.

Rural lobby groups are threatening the government with more protests involving acts of civil disobedience to reclaim rights of access to public land.

Cattlemen, who are backed by the federal government and state opposition, claim the state government has revoked their grazing licences to win over the powerful environmental lobby.

Premier Steve Bracks has been diligently cultivating the rural vote and the prospect of a radical rural backlash would be a political setback at the beginning of an election year.

On Thursday, acting Premier and Environment Minister John Thwaites announced a \$7.5 million grant to restore the park, including measures such as controlling feral animals and replanting.

"Mr Thwaites should be ashamed of himself for being part of such a sham. The alpine environment is the most pristine in Victoria and cattlemen have been caring for the high country for 170 years," said Doug Treasure, president of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria.

Last year, the federal government failed in a bid to stop the state government's ban by issuing an emergency heritage listing to protect the cattlemen's 170-year tradition.

Graeme Stoney, a Liberal member of state parliament who has joined the protest by riding with the cattlemen, said: "This protest raises again the wider issue of national park funding and management, the need for a more balanced use of our parks and access to public land generally."

Country Voice, a rural lobby group, has also joined the protest by helping the cattlemen reconnoitre the route and providing logistic support.

Chairman Bob Richardson said: "We have to recognise that it was civil disobedience by green protesters that ultimately persuaded the government to lock up public land. If we want to take back our country we will have to adopt similar tactics."

Independent environmental studies that urged the government to ban the cattle have described the alpine region as of "exceptional conservation value".