

# Emotions ride high in battle for alpine grazing



**Taking a stand:** Cattlemen move their livestock over Mount Howitt, in the Alpine National Park, defying the ban on grazing, as they trek to a protest meeting at Rose River this Sunday

Picture: Trevor Pinder

Natasha Robinson

THE Victorian High Country is in for a showdown after cattlemen who have defied a government ban on traditional grazing in the Alpine National Park were yesterday threatened with thousands of dollars in fines.

Graziers herding cattle into the park in protest against the ban on the 170-year-old practice were yesterday confronted by police, rangers and Country Fire Authority personnel.

The confrontation with police, who interviewed and warned the

horsemen, followed a protest on Sunday in which cattlemen ignored a request by Wonnangatta Valley park rangers to turn their cattle around and leave the park.

"We told them we had no beef with the staff of Parks Victoria," said Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria president **Doug Treasure**.

"Our protest is against policy as dictated by the urban-centric Government. We're the scapegoats for the guilt complex of urban Australia."

Parks Victoria chief executive

Mark Stone said the graziers faced fines of \$1000 per cattle head.

"Our first step will be to say to them, 'It is illegal to graze cattle in the park, you're aware of that and most of your colleagues have accepted that decision,'" Mr Stone said.

"We are dealing with a really small number of remaining licensees who are looking at wanting to pursue the issue."

Mr Stone said alpine graziers paid only \$5.50 to \$6 per adult cow to graze their stock during the 16-week licence period in the

alpine state forest area where grazing was still allowed. "This is a benefit that in a broadacre sense very few have available to them, and a lot of their colleagues don't think they should be getting it so lightly," he said.

The Victorian Government decided to ban alpine grazing in June after scientific research indicated cattle destroyed alpine bogs and other pristine natural attributes of the national park, which stretches 660,000ha from near Mansfield to the NSW border.

The Government is offering graziers compensation of \$100

per head of cattle, part of a \$5.4 million package over four years to control weeds, rehabilitate damaged areas and maintain historic huts.

Mr Stone said there was overwhelming evidence that cattle destroyed native bushlands. "They are environments that take hundreds of years to create and can be damaged just in an instant by a mob of cattle, and the areas don't recover because they're in the alpine strata."

But mountain cattlemen argue the decision will destroy 170 years of cultural heritage and say they

manage the park better than authorities.

"If you come and stand in the paddock that I'm standing in right now you will see weeds like you wouldn't believe, and a fuel load like you wouldn't believe," Mr Treasure said.

"The CFA officer that was here said he measured a fuel load today at around about 16 to 30 times the extreme load of fuel."

The protesters will gather with supporters on Sunday at Rose River, south of Wangaratta in northeast Victoria, as their protest comes to an end.