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Regenerating the high country: Sarah Scott-Cochrane and Bronwyn Hardsky, both from Parks Victoria, examine regrowth on the Bogong High Plains in the Alpine National Park near Falls Creek.

PICTURE: SANDY SCHEIDT

State plan to give high country's bogs a \$7.5 million facelift

By **SASHA SHTARGOT**

THE cattle are gone — and the next to leave Victoria's Alpine National Park are feral goats, brumbies and even the odd willow tree. Along with evicting unwelcome guests, a State Government \$7.5 million environment plan for the park aims to rehabilitate sensitive alpine bogs, which trap and store water in the soil. Historic alpine huts are also to be restored.

But High Country cattlemen reckon the \$7.5 million is a

steep price to pay when they took good care of the environment for free.

Doug Treasure, president of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association, said generations of cattlemen kept down weeds and culled feral animals.

"We're in favour of anything that improves the environment, but the Government is using us as a political football," he said. "They say mountain cattlemen are bad buggers and we got rid of them, so things will pick up."

Opposition environment

spokesman David Davis also questioned whether the clean-up package was new money or just a "reannouncement" of existing alpine funding.

Mr Davis called for "proper scientific assessment" of the impact of the alpine grazing ban and the clean-up package. "We need the scientific evidence, as to what is occurring in the mountains," he said.

The bogs, which consist of dense clumps of moss, ensure a slow and lasting flow of water to alpine rivers and are important

for water quality. Government funding will help Landcare volunteers build small weirs in the soil to contain ground water and encourage moss growth.

The Government last May announced a plan to ban the 45 operators who used to drive about 8000 cows into the high country for grazing each summer. This summer was the first time mountain cattlemen were not given licences to graze their stock in the Alpine National Park. Cattle are still allowed in forest next to the park.

Acting Premier John Thwaites, speaking in the Alpine National Park near Falls Creek yesterday, said the damage to bogs from cattle hoofs needed to be urgently repaired.

"With the removal of cattle from the Alpine National Park, we'll see more wild flowers, we'll see an improved environment and that's going to be great for the people who visit the park," he said.

"This area is the source of many of our major rivers and it is very important we protect it."

Kate Bradley, a volunteer with Falls Creek Landcare, said restoring alpine bogs would mean the return of wildlife such as native lizards.

The Victorian National Parks Association welcomed the Government's environmental works program. "Until now it has been impossible to rehabilitate these fragile areas because of the continuing damage from cattle trampling and chewing their way across the alps," said director Charlie Sherwin. "This is the beginning of a new era."