

# A new front in the Snowy River cattle battle

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Charlie Lovick, at Wonnangatta Station in Victoria's high country this week, wants to see cattle re-introduced to the area to control weeds and fuel loads. 'It could soon all be lost'. Picture: Aaron Francis. *Source:* TheAustralian

THE cattlemen from Snowy River country have been given their final chance to graze their charges deep in the granite heart of Australia's alpine wilderness. The Victorian government is backing a three-year trial of cattle grazing in the Wonnangatta Valley, once the most remote of the high-country stations, wedged in anonymity between the Mount Buller ski fields, the Great Dividing Range and the Snowy River. Victorian Environment Minister Ryan Smith will refer the issue to the Abbott government on Monday, backing a scientific study during the summer months of about 60 head of hereford and angus cattle. It will be part of a scientific investigation of bushfire prevention options across 2200 hectares that cattleman Charlie Lovick and his kindred spirits hope will take them back to their heartland. As fuel loads increase and weeds take hold in the Wonnangatta Valley, Mr Lovick and several prominent mountain-cattle families gathered this week to argue that Pitt Street "greenies" have missed the point about the Victorian and NSW high country. Environmentalists, they say, are killing the mountains with misguided kindness. "From our point of view, the bush is dead," Mr Lovick told *The Weekend Australian*. "There's just not the people around. We are told we are a

dying race."Now into his 60s, Mr Lovick knows the country as well as anyone, having ridden the hills and valleys for more than 50 years, his skills called upon to train Tom Burlinson for the film version of Banjo Patterson's *The Man From Snowy River*.As a 14-year-old, he galloped his way across the Wonnangatta Valley, about 250km northeast of Melbourne, but today weeds are among the many obstacles that would pull that equine sprint back to a walk.For decades he and his wife, Glenda, roamed the mountains with their cattle, but the decision of successive Labor governments to ban alpine grazing has not only curbed the cattle but slowly throttled the high-country legend."We're getting older, our kids have had to do other things," Mr Lovick said. "It could soon all be lost."The Lovicks are just one of a group of families barred from grazing in the alpine areas. They shared the dislocation with other high-country families this week including the Stoneys, McCormacks, Coopers and Turners, who all bounced their way into the valley by four-wheel drive from as far afield as Wulgulmerang near the Snowy River.The preservation of Australian bush heritage will be crucial to the application.Wonnangatta is old pastoral land in a valley several kilometres long and several hundred metres wide. It sits below Mt Buller and it is roughly 70km as the crow flies to the Snowy River. It was settled in 1860 and taken from private hands in 1988.The valley is the only potential fire refuge for hundreds of campers who descend on the area each summer, surrounded by razor-edged peaks with only crawling-pace tracks.The closure of cattle grazing in the area has had unintended consequences: fuel load has galloped ahead in the valley and weeds, from thistles to blackberries, are choking the flats."It's not an ideological position, it's a land-management issue," Mr Smith said. "To manage the process is not a one-hit fix."The Victorian government plans to conduct the first of its grazing trials as early as January next year, as long as federal Environment Minister Greg Hunt gives the scientific survey the go-ahead.A spokesman for Mr Hunt said yesterday the government would assess the referral when it was received in accordance with Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.Former Labor environment minister Tony Burke opposed the Victorian government's first bid for a high-country grazing trial last year, but the politics have changed in Canberra, giving the cattlemen their best -- probably last -- chance of returning.Mr Burke enraged the cattlemen when he compared the trial of grazing with Japan's so-called scientific whaling program.