

# Victoria bans Alpine National Park cattle grazing

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Reporter



Cattle are rounded up after grazing the high country near Mount Buller. *Photo: Joe Armao*

Cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park is over, with the new Labor government fulfilling a long-standing election promise to ban the practice.

The government has ended, effective immediately, a scientific trial involving about 60 cattle that was being used to test claims cattle grazing can reduce fire risk in national parks.

The new Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Lisa Neville, will also put a ban on such scientific trials into legislation to stop future governments reversing the policy.

Controversial: Cattle grazing in the Alpine National Park. *Photo: Justin McManus*

"Our national parks aren't beef farms," the minister said in a statement.

"The Coalition wasted money on court challenges and trial after trial when the science is clear – grazing in the high country is detrimental to the environment and it has no value in reducing fuel loads or bushfire risk."

The ban represents the latest milestone in a fight that has been raging since 2004, when the Bracks Labor government first moved to ban grazing in the national park, a 600,000-hectare strip of rugged country stretching from central Gippsland all the way to the NSW border.

Up until then between 6000 and 8000 cattle regularly grazed in the park.

Upon its election in 2010 the Coalition state government under Premier Ted Baillieu introduced about 400 cattle back to the Alpine National Park, a small-scale trial that kicked off a major battle with federal Labor's environment minister, Tony Burke.

The Coalition dodged the Bracks government's ban by labelling the re-entry of cattle into the park as a scientific study, a loophole in the legislation. That loophole will now be closed.

Proponents of cattle grazing in the park, primarily the Mountain Cattlemen's Association, argue cattle grazing can significantly reduce fire risk thanks to the cattle eating much of the flammable undergrowth.

"It's what we worked for, the management of the high country, and we thought we had something for the first time in a lot of years with the trial to put to bed some of the misconceptions that have been pushed around ... about cattlemen being selfish millionaires," the association's president, Charlie Lovick, said.

"They all stated that there wasn't enough scientific evidence to say that cattle reduced fire risk. I thought that's what this trial was about.

"It gets caught up in politics, and now there'll be nothing that comes to fruition out of this and we'll be in the same situation where we can't say one way or another."

Mr Lovick said even in the short time the latest trial had been running, good results had been achieved.

"In the very short time that we were out there with the cattle ... it's the first time that I've seen that country look fresh and healthy since about the late '80s.

"The thing the cattle has done more than anything else, it's brought a focus to the country. It's brought people to a recognition that the bush needs to be looked at."

Conservationists, such as the Victorian National Parks Association, meanwhile argue the fire-safety argument is not backed by any published science, and that the cattle cause significant damage to the protected environment within the national park.

"From start to finish it's all been flawed and essentially about politics, not science," VNPA executive director Matt Ruchel said.

Mr Ruchel said at least three separate peer-reviewed studies had been done in the last decade, and all had showed grazing to have no large-scale fire prevention benefits.

"These studies have been done to death. We know what the results are – essentially there's no impact at a landscape level from cattle grazing.

"For the cattlemen, we think it's time to move on."

However, peace and closure does not appear within sight.

"We have always said if this trial had've gone ahead we would have stood by the umpire's decision", Mr Lovick said.

"Now that it has not we won't stop fighting. Now these mountains are under threat, we won't stop our fight."