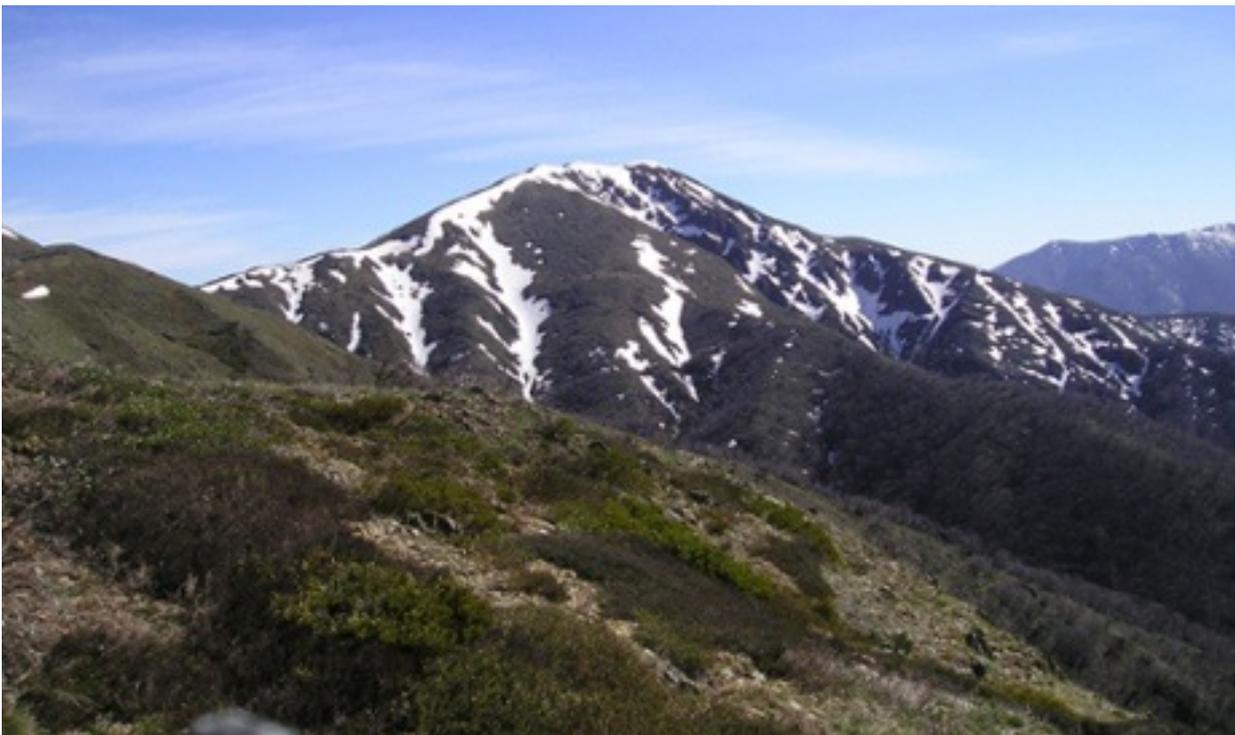


Victoria to consider reintroduction of alpine cattle grazing

State seeks federal environment minister's approval for three-year trial amid concerns for the region's fragile ecosystems

Oliver Milman



Mount Feathertop in Victoria's alpine national park, where grazing has been banned since 2005. Photograph: AAP

The Victorian government says it will consider the controversial reintroduction of cattle grazing in the state's alpine regions if given the go-ahead by federal environment minister Greg Hunt.

The state government has sought approval from Canberra for a three-year grazing trial in the Wonnangatta Valley, in Victoria's alpine region.

The previous federal Labor government blocked Victoria from allowing cattle to graze in mountainous areas last year, citing concerns that the animals degraded the area's sensitive biodiversity.

But the grazing industry insists cattle would reduce the region's risk of severe bushfires by eating the vegetation that fuels the flames.

Victoria's environment minister, Ryan Smith, said he might reinstate alpine grazing to help remove fire fuel and invasive weeds.

"If we can assess that grazing does reduce fuel loads then we'd certainly consider using grazing more broadly," he said. "If grazing can reduce fuel loads while having a minimum environmental impact, then I'll consider grazing as a tool I can use."

The Wonnangatta Valley, part of the alpine national park, was grazed for more than 170 years before the previous state Labor government halted the practice in 2005.

The president of the Mountain Cattlemen's Association of Victoria, Charlie Lovick, said the grazing ban had been a "disaster" for the area.

"Since the decision to stop grazing, Wonnangatta has grown into a fire trap," he said. "The valley is now tinder-dry with metre-high grass and infested with invasive species such as blackberries, briars and St John's wort, which adversely affect native plants and local biodiversity."

"Any midsummer fire would burn with such intensity that everything in the fire's path would be destroyed."

Conservationists argue that the overwhelming weight of evidence shows cattle do virtually nothing to reduce fire threats and can damage fragile ecosystems.

[Recent research](#) by the University of Tasmania and University of Melbourne found cattle grazing had no impact on reducing fire fuel.

Grant Williamson, a research fellow in environmental science at the University of Tasmania and co-author of the study, told Guardian Australia the science was clear on the effect of introducing cattle to mountainous areas.

"A lot of research has been done into this and it's pretty obvious that cows eat grass," he said. "They don't eat shrubs and they certainly don't go among the trees and eat bark, which are the elements that would fuel a fire."

"Eating grass could have an impact on grassland fires, but that isn't the kind of fire that the public, or government, is concerned about."

Williamson said cattle could have a severely detrimental impact on alpine biodiversity.

"Cattle have quite a long-term effect on an area, so I don't think the species they knocked out of the area will have recovered since the ban," he said.

“In the high country there are concerns about erosion caused by the hooves of cattle. The alpine region has a unique suite of species and a slow growth rate due to its altitude.

“This seems to be a political and economic move to give additional land to graziers.”

The Victorian National Parks Association said it was aghast at the prospect of cattle being introduced to a national park area.

“Cattle grazing is not appropriate in national parks and this seems to be a backdoor way of getting cheap grazing for [the Victorian government’s] cattlemen mates again,” said Phil Ingamells, a spokesman for the association. “It’s a park, not a paddock.”

A spokesman for Hunt said the grazing proposal would be open for public comment until 11 December. He will then decide whether the trial, which could start as soon as January, should be permitted under national environmental law.