

28 April, 2008

The Honourable Gavin Jennings MLC  
Minister for Environment and Climate Change  
Level 22, 50 Lonsdale Street  
MELBOURNE 3000

Dear Gavin

**The Problem of Feral Horses in the Alpine National Park**

Whilst a feral horse (and pig) problem identical to that I describe exists in other parts of the Australian Alps, and around the Bogong Plains, the matters I raise principally deal with the Cobberas section of Victoria's Alpine National Park, commencing east of Benambra through to Black Mountain.

In a nutshell the problem is feral horses in unsustainable numbers (often combining with the destructive activities of feral pigs) causing serious long-term damage to:

1. Delicate Alpine habitats, including alpine bogs or (sometimes called moss beds) and as a consequence, damage to the rare and endangered species and general biodiversity these habitats support;
2. The ability of these Alpine National Parks to sustain their core functions; and
3. A national water asset. That is, serious structural damage to the water producing and regulating ecosystems that have provided a year round reliable, quality water flow to the Murray and Snowy Rivers. Yes, the Murray is dying at both ends! and
4. The Alps ability to withstand or minimise the impact of climate change.

In addition

5. Horses and pigs are potential carriers of livestock diseases such as equine influenza (horses), and foot and mouth disease (pigs, deer). These mobile feral populations extend from rugged mountain country down into more populated farmland. Any diseases they harbour cannot be easily eradicated, or quarantined from moving into domestic livestock.

**The Evidence, Cattle Removal, Subsequent Horse Damage  
My material & the Alpine Taskforce's Report**

I enclose some Short Notes, and a longer Discussion Paper on the issue. I can provide you with number of before and after photos showing extensive horse and pig damage at numerous sites in the Cobberas area, but they can easily be browsed at a dedicated Feral Horse web site (via the link at [www.retiredaussies.com](http://www.retiredaussies.com).)

Like cattle, horses graze, trample, pug, and deposit dung, on a variety of alpine habitats. Of particular concern is the impact of grazing and tramping of moss beds [bogs] and other delicate wet areas.

Unlike feral horses, cattle only grazed the high country in the summer months with licences limiting cattle numbers at any one location. There is compelling anecdotal evidence that the Mountain Cattlemen actively reduced horse numbers, to preserve habitat for cattle grazing. Certainly horse numbers have increased significantly since cattle removal.

In 2005 a comprehensive Report on the Future of Cattle Grazing in the Alpine National Park by the Alpine Grazing Taskforce led to the removal of Cattle from the Park. A build-up of feral horses are now causing the same type of damage to the National Park, as the cattle damage described in that report.

In respect of the areas of the Cobberas I know well, from before cattle removal, I am of the opinion that the damage I now see being caused by feral horses, is far worse than the damage I saw, caused by cattle grazing. In particular the extensive damage to the bogs, stream edges, and wet areas depicted in my before and after photos. As my before photos show, these places largely survived many decades of cattle grazing, but are now being destroyed by feral horse and pig damage.

In recommending the removal of cattle the Taskforce found there were significant damaging impacts and no overall benefits to the environment from cattle grazing. That cattle grazing, trampling, pugging and dung was, amongst other things:

- Causing unacceptable levels of damage to water catchments, moss beds [bogs] watercourses and vegetation.
- Adversely affecting local water quality.
- A significant threat to at least 25 flora species, 7 fauna species and 4 plant communities found in the park that are listed as rare, vulnerable or threatened with extinction.
- Contributing to the establishment and spread of several weed species.
- Inhibiting the rehabilitation and restoration necessary to repair modified and damaged areas.

That the scientific research was adequate and consistently reveals that grazing has deleterious effect on biodiversity.

### **Climate Change**

Horse damage destroys the very structure of Alpine wet habitats. Climate change will allow horses to extend the period of their destructive presence in these habitats, and allow less time for the habits to recover.

The Taskforce considered available research and the National Biodiversity and Climate Change Action Plan 2004-07 and concluded:

*Under climate change, species that are already vulnerable will be most at risk. The Australian Alps are considered to be one of the three most vulnerable ecosystems in Australia to potential climatic warming because of their restricted range and cold climate. Some specialised alpine communities will come under severe threat, while herbaceous communities will be more susceptible to invasion by woody species. The preferred and most practical option to minimise the impacts of climate change is to retain, restore and protect existing habitat, so that the whole ecosystem becomes more resilient.*

### **What has been done?**

Some positive actions have been taken locally, including action taken to increase the number of horses removed from the Bonong area, but no funds are available to extend that activity to the Cobberas, which is suffering badly from the impact of a large numbers of horses.

It is well established that the number of horses currently being removed from the Coberas by contract arrangement with the Alpine Brumby Management Association (around 100 per annum) will not prevent the horse population increasing.

### **What should be done?**

This topic is discussed in the material supplied. Generally I support the adoption of the 3 horse capture methods identified in the NSW Horse Management Plan namely contract arrangements for trapping with trap yards, brumby running, and mustering.

I suggest any contract arrangements should provide both directives and incentives to target the removal of young fillies.

At the very least additional contractors should be engaged forthwith to complement the work of the Alpine Brumby Management Association, and to dramatically increase the number of feral horses removed from the Cobberas area.

My Notes and Discussion Paper deal with this topic and describe other elements to be included in a properly funded Cobberas Feral Horse Management Program as part of a coordinated multi-jurisdictional program throughout the Australian Alps. These highlight the desirability of a whole of governments approach being adopted.

Minister, as I see it, it is all about funding, and the political will to tackle this issue.

I have referred my material to the Victorian National Parks Association and will now begin to promote the issue, and the dedicated web site, to all those who might be interested, including politicians and the media.

I understand many mountain cattlemen (who had argued that feral horses caused more damage than cattle) are angry that understandings that feral horse numbers would be controlled post the removal of cattle, have not been honoured.

Certainly many operate properties near these National Parks that are also impacted by the build-up of feral horses, and the presence of pigs. Many would welcome action being taken to eradicate pigs, and reduce horse numbers. Also many are experienced bushmen (and bushwomen) who have a love of the high country and are saddened by the damage now being caused.

There are those who have a great love of horses and would oppose any action being taken to reduce feral horse numbers in Alpine areas. However the Federal Department of the Environment and Water Resources identify feral horses as a serious environmental pest and estimates there are some 300,000 feral horses in Australia. The Australian Alps may contain about 1-2% of this total population. Unlike the species they threaten, they are a far from an endangered species.

My recent travels around the Cobberas have confirmed the presence of a large number of horses in every remote nook and cranny. The smell of horse dung is everywhere. Recently a hiker walking out of Cowombat Flat reported counting 50 horses along his way. All in all a very sad way to find what is otherwise a most beautiful place to visit.

In the end it's a question of whether:

The Victorian public and your Government want these Alpine National Parks, the habitats, and the biodiversity they contain, preserved in for the enjoyment of current and future generations, and to protect an important national water resource.

Or

Whether your Government will continue to fund the maintenance of these areas to provide a horse paddock for an out of control, and ever increasing, population of feral horses.

Having successfully taken the very brave political action to remove cattle from the Alpine National against a well resourced and vocal opposition backed by your governments political opponents, the reduction of horse numbers should, by comparison, be a piece of cake.

Urgent action is needed to reduce feral horse numbers around the Cobberas. And a longer term strategy needs to be put in place to tackle the broader problems outlined in my material.

We all seem to be fired up about saving the Murray but this serious, systematic, structural damage to the very source of the Murray's water, seems to be ignored.

I realise some issues such as water resources, stock disease, and tourism are matters beyond your portfolio. In this case these, and issues such as, climate change and biodiversity conservation are interlinked and multi-jurisdictional. I urge you to take a leadership role in involving your state and federal ministerial colleagues in a joint strategy to deal with this issue.

Regards

Bill Kosky