

# Farmers fear land takeover

By Kath Gannaway

WHEN a member of the North-South Pipeline Alliance suggested to Dianne Towt that they could pump out their dam the response was predictable.

"I told her to go to hell," she said.

Malcolm and Dianne Towt's export beef property is on the Melba Highway at Dixons Creek and, in the absence of any final route information, as far as they know, they are on the pipeline route.

The Towts are worried about the potential harm and the dollar cost of the pipeline on their business, but they are also a better than average example of the emotional cost, they say, landowners, just like them, are having to deal with on a day-to-day basis.

They also have a property at Yea, on the pipeline route, and another in Gippsland, which will be affected by the desalination plant.

At 58, Mrs Towt is fighting breast cancer. Malcolm is approaching 80 and after being burnt out at Yea and battling 11 years of drought, he admits he's struggling to cope with the added stress of the pipeline.

"We're buggered," he says - putting it bluntly.

"You think this is going to be the year you can get ahead a bit, and the next thing they tell you they are going to rip through your place," Mrs Towt said, as the couple spoke last week with specialist compulsory acquisition valuer Gerald McMahon.

It's a conversation they don't want to be having. But they don't have a choice.

"We're just at the end of our tether, and so are a lot of other people," she said.

After speaking with an Alliance representative they say they believed the pipe would be laid along the adjoining road reserve, leaving their quarantine paddocks undisturbed.

"When I didn't get any paperwork after our talk I got suspicious," Mrs Towt explained.

"Then we were told by neighbours that



**What value does a farmer put on a dam? Malcolm and Dianne Towt look over their property with compulsory acquisition valuer Gerald McMahon.**

it was going right through our place."

It's the cumulative effect that they want Melbourne Water and its Alliance partners to grasp.

Getting letters addressed to Mr Towt's parents, who are long gone, doesn't inspire confidence, they say, in the ability of the Alliance to manage anything much.

They've spent untold hours at meetings and on the phone, had gates left open, they worry about insurance cover if someone is hurt on the property, and they grapple with the possibility of losing trees, which have

been on the property for decades and provide shade for their calves.

The thought that anyone would suggest draining the dam is, Mrs Towt says, an insult.

"That dam is liquid gold to us; but what can you expect, they're not farming people. They just don't know."

"They think farmers are silly but you have to do everything when you're on the land; you have to be a lawyer, a vet, an accountant..."

Mr McMahon's advice to the Towts

and to other landowners in the same position was to work within the Compulsory Acquisition Act, which, he said, can't be put in place until the government has served the appropriate notices.

"They (the Alliance) have rights under the Act to compulsorily acquire. They have to be reasonable," he said, "but they can virtually put the line where they like."

After generations of life on the land, the Towts have added the Alliance to fire, flood and drought as a new challenge to face the only way they know how - head on.