

Young Farmers promised a new lease on life

By **ADAM CAREY**

IT'S the final of the Victorian Young Farmers Challenge, and the team from Nathalia have made a terrible error. In an attempt to get a break on the team from Dean-Newlyn, they've overloaded the back of their tractor with hay bales and, as the driver weaves between the witches hats, bales start tumbling off.

It's the sort of simple mistake a young farmer could easily make, but at the Royal Melbourne Show, in front of a packed stand and with team pride on the line, it proves fatal for Nathalia's hopes. Not even a disintegrating bundle of chaff can stop Dean-Newlyn crossing the finish line in first place.

The competitive challenge is a rare outing for the Victorian Young Farmers organisation, which has shrivelled to just six groups statewide and about 300 members in the past decade since cuts to funding.

Agriculture Minister Peter Walsh yesterday announced the group would receive \$400,000 over the next four years — out of a total package of \$1 million the Coalition promised when in opposition — in a bid to reinvigorate the rural youth network.

The money will go to employing a part-time secretary and funding personal development courses for members. The organisation's president, Carlie Harrington, said she hoped it would go

towards "helping young farmers buy their first farm".

Up in the stands, cheering on the team from Dean-Newlyn (which was made up of young farmers from two small towns near Ballarat), Victorian Young Farmers member Rachael Wallis said the social network created by the organisation could help to slow the exodus to Melbourne among young people from country Victoria.

"There's a lot more career opportunities and a lot more going on in Melbourne than there is in Dean, where the pub's shut down and there's not a lot to do," she said. "Groups like Young Farmers keep people tied in together and it's a bit of a social outlet; it keeps people wanting to stay in the town."



Not in clover: Stray bales end Nathalia's hopes.