

Horses died on Hobbit time

By ANDREA O'NEIL

Three horses due to appear in *The Hobbit* film died due to the incompetence of film staff, a protester stationed on Gray's Rd claimed last week.

John Smythe worked as a horse wrangler for *The Hobbit* production team from November 2010 to October 2011, when he claims he was fired for speaking out about the deaths of three horses in his care.

Mr Smythe, a farmer, horse trekking business owner and ex-shepherd from Kaitieke Valley near Taumarunui, said he buried the horses himself at 260 Gray's Rd, where all the horses were kept while filming.

Mr Smythe protested outside the address last Wednesday, calling for an investigation into the horse deaths.

"Three horses dying when they're not even filming, they're in the care of wranglers in the farm,

you can't tell me that's the means to not having an investigation," he said.

Mr Smythe said the first death happened in February 2011, when a knee-high pony named Rainbow was put in a paddock with "high-strung geldings", who trampled the pony to death the first night.

The pony had a broken neck and back, and had been covering by the border fence all night, he said.

"This little fellow had no chance."

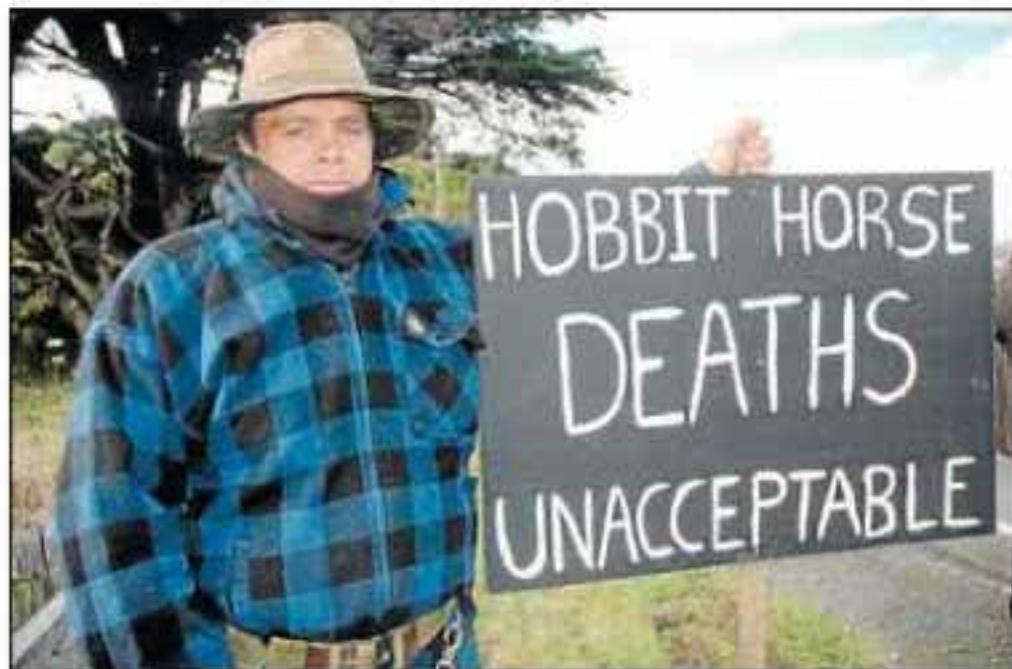
The geldings' behaviour could have been expected.

"We questioned it. We were told to do our jobs."

The second death was of a horse, Claire, which was put in a paddock with a sheer bluff down to a stream.

Again, wranglers questioned the decision, but were assured the horse would be safe, Mr Smythe said.

Two days later the horse was



Speaking out: Former horse wrangler for *The Hobbit* John Smythe protested on Gray's Rd last Wednesday about the deaths of three horses in film staff's care.

found submerged in the creek.

After the two deaths it was decided all horses would be housed in stables, which Mr Smythe believes led to the third

death. Stabled horses were fed grain, and a horse called Zeppelin died because its stomach was accustomed to grass, he said.

"He died a slow, agonising

death. That was pretty much it for me, I had had enough of seeing incompetence from people who had had no background on farms."

When Mr Smythe spoke to management about the decisions that had been made, he lost his job.

3Foot7 production company did not deny horses had died while filming *The Hobbit*.

Instead of answering our questions about Mr Smythe's allegations, a spokeswoman released this statement:

"Throughout production we have worked closely with, and have been monitored by, the American Humane Association and have taken great care to follow their guidelines.

"We also work with a local veterinary surgeon to ensure the ongoing health and welfare of all the animals in our charge. The production has complete and ongoing confidence in the integrity of, and care provided by, its animal team."