

TRANSCRIPT

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND PLANNING

Inquiry into fire season preparedness

Melbourne — 7 July 2016

Members

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Ms Harriet Shing — Deputy Chair

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Witnesses

Associate Professor Janet Stanley (affirmed), Principal Research Fellow, Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, University of Melbourne,

Dr Paul Read (sworn), Senior Research Fellow, Monash Sustainability Institute, Monash University, and

Ms Samantha Hunter (affirmed), Chief Executive Officer, Crime Stoppers Victoria.

The CHAIR — If I can perhaps ask Associate Professor Stanley to lead off with a short submission. I note you have presented a document which is a very nice précis.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — I would just like to talk to you about the key points perhaps that we would really like to impart to you from this conversation this afternoon, and there are five of them. So just working through them, first there is a need we believe to greatly step up the response to the risk of bushfire in Victoria. There has clearly been an increase in risk of bushfire, both in the heat — the intensity — and the frequency. We believe we have not done reciprocal response to preventing this happening, and we strongly urge that this is undertaken.

We also believe that we are very much reliant on one form of prevention, which is an environmental modification. In fact about 85 or 90 per cent of fires are human lit in some form, whether it is intentional or accidental. To not actually take this into account is not using all the resources that we can have and use and need to use for future prevention of bushfires in Victoria.

We are arguing that there should be a body that can coordinate and look and pull people together and have the resources to actually coordinate a full prevention response. At the moment it is sitting in all different areas and a lot of it is not actually happening. So we argue that an overarching body to address these issues would be highly valuable and do some longer term planning. As you will see in our submission, a lot of the things we are suggesting are not short term; they are planning for the future because as the climate warms up the problem is only going to get worse.

We recommend a range of preventive measures that we have outlined in the submission, including greater involvement of the community — this has been talked about but is not actually happening very well on the ground — and creation of awareness, which is why we have got Sam Hunter from Crime Stoppers, whose organisation is very capable to lead this type of community education about this issue.

Finally, as you would expect us to say — we are researchers — the reality is that we just know so little about, one, bushfires generally, as you have probably discovered with your discussions about cool burning, and — —

The CHAIR — We are right at the start of our hearings. This is our first day of hearings, so we are learning.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — Okay. There is very little knowledge on this internationally, and there is even less knowledge about arson and preventing this and how we respond to this. It is a shame because we are not going to be effective until we understand the problem a lot more. So that in a nutshell are the key points that we would like to leave with you, but we are very happy to elaborate or respond.

The CHAIR — I will be quite brief; I am conscious that we have got a quite short time frame. The environmental modification you point to is one form of prevention, and you think there is excessive reliance on that one form of prevention?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — I do, yes.

The CHAIR — Let me understand here. You are not actually arguing that that is not important or that reduction in fuel load is not longer term — if you turn it around the other way and, say, you did not do much prevention, fuel load would build up over time and whatever the causative factor or the triggering or initiating factor for fire, it is on one level partially dependent on available fuel.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — That is not our area. We are specialising in human-initiated fires.

The CHAIR — I want to come to that in a minute.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — But you will find research that has been done after a severe fire and the intensity, the occurrence of the fire, was no different between areas that have been cool burnt and the areas that have not. My little understanding of it is that what seems to be the nub of the issue is clearance around the immediate property. The other issue with that is that we are allowing penetration of new builds in highly dangerous fire areas, and we are not doing enough to address this problem either. But mostly what we would like to talk about is human fires.

The CHAIR — I just want to understand that so we can in further evidence examine that point about preventative burning and the fuel load issue.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — It is very inclusive of the value of cool burns.

The CHAIR — When it comes to those who might light fires — arsonists — what are you saying here — that there is a lack of integration in police activity, a lack of community involvement in that process or a lack of penalties? What exactly?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — All of the above.

Dr READ — If we consider that fuel load is one half, the other half is ignition, and ignition overwhelmingly, for the past 15 years of research, is human factors 85 per cent, 30 per cent usually are left suspected, and that leaves another 30 per cent that are definitely humanly lit. When we talk about arson, it is a legal term so we have to be careful about that. We generally talk about ‘fire setting’ because fire setting does not necessarily mean that it is malicious; it can be accidental from the use of tools.

The CHAIR — I take your point.

Dr READ — And it depends on the motivations. All of the research, whether it be in New South Wales or South Australia, tends to indicate that 50 per cent of fire-setting activity is occurring among children, and among children we have a lot of different reasons why those children are lighting fires. We can explore that further later if you wish. What we are talking about in general is that fuel load is one issue, ignition is a major issue, and ignition within communities is linked to the conditions of communities. The problem is that most of the kinds of communities that are creating the conditions for an arsonist to evolve are those communities that are on the urban fringe, so they are already right next to all that fuel load.

The CHAIR — Do you think there is a social underpinning to this as well?

Dr READ — There is a social underpinning most definitely.

The CHAIR — As well as an individual perhaps sometimes.

Dr READ — As well as individual, and we are working across all of those areas. The interesting thing is that when it comes to working with the communities themselves, we have an opportunity and an obligation to encourage and support communities in being able to identify people who may be at risk. It does not necessarily mean that we need to demonise these people, but it certainly means that, for example, the services of Crime Stoppers, which goes directly into communities, educates people about arson, tells them what to look out for and then encourages them to make reports, that report need not always end up in a conviction of arson. Sometimes what we need is to be able to have all services working together, whether it be education, human services, CFA, police and a whole variety of other community organisations, to be looking out for people who might be at risk and not only to provide judicial responses but also human services responses.

At the moment we have a program in development that we have been working on for many years across those organisations, and that needs a little bit of oxygen to enable that to start operating so that we can treat particularly young fire-setting behaviours among young fire setters long before they develop into the kinds of people who will be setting fires like during Black Saturday. The adult bushfire arsonists are a completely different breed. Sorry, I have gone on too much.

Ms HUNTER — I would like to make a comment about the education process. Crime Stoppers initially received funding for bushfire arson out of the bushfire royal commission, and that funding was then extended by EMV, so we are entering into our last year of funding this year.

The CHAIR — So the 16–17 financial year is your last year of funding?

Ms HUNTER — Yes, that is my understanding.

The CHAIR — And how much is that funding?

Ms HUNTER — It is \$300 000 a year. For that we deliver over a million dollars in community education and crime prevention messaging and advertising. Each year we receive a significant number of information reports in relation to arson activity. One of the important things — and Paul pointed to it — was that it does not necessarily end in a conviction, because we know arsonists are very difficult to detect and convict. But what it

does help to do, and we get a significant amount of information on, is help with police identifying persons of interest, people they can then keep under surveillance during the Operation Firesetter days, and also it gives the public the only mechanism to confidentially report information. As we know, especially in regional and rural towns, people are loath to come forward to local police to air their suspicions, so it is a vital service both for people to be able to call us or provide it online.

One of the other focuses is that Crime Stoppers is a 29-year-old crime prevention organisation. That is what we do: we gather intelligence, and we run crime prevention and crime detection activities. As a crime prevention specialist, during that busy summer season we partner with Victoria Police and with the CFA, but obviously that is not their core role. Whilst they are willing partners with us during that time, that is not their focus or their priority, but it is our priority on crime prevention. While we partner with the CFA, recklessly causing fires is a crime, the CFA is not a crime organisation. Crime Stoppers is a crime intelligence collection service, so we do have an important role to play in community education. We have 98 per cent brand trust with the community, and over 60 000 Victorians — —

The CHAIR — Ninety eight per cent?

Ms HUNTER — Brand trust, so the community trusts to call Crime Stoppers. We have a \$30 million pro bono media reach each year within Victoria, so there are whole-of-government savings when they partner with Crime Stoppers in crime prevention messages. Also — vitally — we do have that confidential reporting portal for community confidence.

Obviously in fire preparedness there is a message if 85 per cent of fires can be stopped because there is a human element. Whether it be a reckless fire, which also is a crime, or whether it be a deliberately lit fire, we believe we have a vital role to play, and we have been partnering with Janet and Paul since Black Saturday, so we have got an evidence base. We are now drilling down and being able to identify communities where they are hard to engage, where the message is not penetrating, so then we have different avenues to market into those different geographical and demographic areas to make sure that every Victorian is hearing the message. We have got anecdotal evidence out in one of the areas where there was an active arsonist. Once we flooded the local community with arson prevention messages and what to look out for, that arson activity ceased. We are a small organisation that is able to be nimble and responsive to where activity is taking place.

The CHAIR — Can I thank you for that evidence and indicate my strong support for your body. It does a marvellous job.

Ms SHING — Thank you for your submission and for the answers you have already provided to the Chair's questions. I would like to go to a number of the stats that you referred to at the outset. I am struggling to do the maths on this. Associate Professor Stanley, you indicated in your opening remarks that 85 per cent of fires could be attributed to direct or indirect human action or inaction, and then later, Dr Read, you indicated that 30 per cent of fires were suspected arson, with 30 per cent being unclear. I am just struggling to understand how we delineate between a human action or inaction, whether advertent or inadvertent, comprising 85 per cent and the subset of which arson plays a role, because those figures do not add up to me.

Dr READ — It is incredibly difficult, actually.

Ms SHING — I feel like I have stumbled on a statistical minefield.

Dr READ — No, that is fine. The research is really difficult because it depends entirely on which resources you are using — whether you are using police statistics or CFA statistics.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — It all varies.

Dr READ — The evidence we are quoting directly from is a 1994 study by the Australian Institute of Criminology. It is the major study which demonstrated that of around about 60 000 fires per year in Australia — bushfires — 85 per cent were linked to human activity. That includes everything from powerlines falling down and that sort of thing. But when they are investigating fires, there will always be a group which are suspected to have been deliberately lit and then a group that are confirmed to have been deliberately lit.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — But there are also the reckless fires, which are not defined as arson, so — —

Ms SHING — Sorry, just before you go on, though, just to go back, we have the 85 per cent in which human activity or inactivity has played a role. That is the powerline situation, a campfire getting out of control and that sort of thing, within which you have 30 per cent suspected of being arson. What subset of that is confirmed?

Dr READ — Confirmed arson?

Ms SHING — Yes.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — It is about 40 per cent.

Ms SHING — Forty per cent of the 30 per cent?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — On top of; so about 40 per cent are confirmed, 30 per cent additionally are suspected, and then the next category of human is reckless fires — unintentional fires.

Ms SHING — Which would be 15 per cent, is that what you are saying, of the 85 per cent? If you could provide that on notice, I am just having trouble understanding how the pie all fits together.

Dr READ — We can provide you with the paper. Then you will have the exact data.

Ms SHING — Thank you. That would be useful.

Ms DUNN — Is it 40 per cent of the 85 per cent?

Ms SHING — Or is it 40 per cent of the 30 per cent?

Dr READ — The take-home message is that about one-third, depending upon the statistics that you use and the resources that you use, are deliberately lit by people, and of those around about half are lit by people below the age of 21.

Ms SHING — On that point, and I represent Gippsland, which was the location of the Hernes Oak fire which many attribute to starting the Hazelwood fire, which was absolutely devastating for the area, and there is some conjecture about the role which ember throw from Driffield may have also played, but I would like to ask about arson in the context of the Gippsland Arson Prevention Program and the extent to which that is helping to mitigate or prevent bushfire in the same way that you, Ms Hunter, outlined in the example before about spreading messages within communities in relation to vigilance, early notification and understanding and thus prevention.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — That is called the GAPP for short. Have you come across it?

Ms SHING — Yes, I have indeed.

Dr READ — That is good.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — It is a really good program. It is not specifically resourced. It is actually a get-together and coordination of emergency services officers of local business, local government — —

Ms HUNTER — Council.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — Yes, council and also HVP, Hancock — the forestry industry — is very important there too. What we do is meet regularly; I am a member of it too. It is really based on community education and awareness and also patrolling and coordination of resources, so what they do is educate the community about the problems of fire. They coordinate patrolling on very high fire days and actually just work together. To a point there is a certain sharing of understanding about persons of interest, so that these people be particularly watched. There is communication with human services, so youth who have the potential to light fires are also part of a watching program within confidential — —

Ms SHING — Does that include the children? You indicated that 50 per cent of fire-setting activities came from children in one study that you quoted. Does that include looking at not just youth and minors within the

upper ranges of the scale, as in under 21, but children as well in terms of the education around fire-setting activity?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — Yes, everyone — talking to schools, setting up stalls, talking to community groups that are there about it, and we coordinate with Crime Stoppers and all work together to have a localised, place-based community approach to fire prevention that I believe is most effective.

Ms SHING — So it is your position that this has been an effective initiative?

Ms HUNTER — I think that that is the kind of thing that would be really good to see taken as a model and replicated across other areas where there is the similar kind of mix of industry groups, so up in the Yarra Valley, including your water protection assets in the Macedon Ranges. I think there are a number of locations that that particular GAPP could be replicated, and the interagency approach I think is really vital but also that outreach into the community itself.

Ms SHING — Thank you very much for that. I appreciate it.

Ms DUNN — Thank you for your submission today. I just wanted to go to 50 per cent of deliberate fire setting is by children, or I think —

Dr READ — Below the age of 21.

Ms DUNN — youth under 21 —

Dr READ — Yes.

Ms DUNN — just to get an extent of the range of age groups within that cohort. What ages are we actually talking?

Dr READ — From memory there are two main studies that triangulate on this data. It does go down to the age of seven, but that is usually accidental fire play getting out of control. Traditionally we always thought that the Australian data showed that the average age of an arsonist was 28 years old. That is not true. When you break it down by age, yes, it averages out to 28, but there are two peaks. The least likely would be the age of 28. We have got 10 per cent female, 50 per cent below the age of 21, and amongst that group we have got some children who have an unhealthy fascination with fire due to developmental disorders; some children — and this is the background that was demonstrated across 5000 students in South Australia — who have a background of child abuse and neglect; and very few — although we are doing research on this to try to uncover it with the juvenile fire awareness program at the MFB — who have conduct disorder, who are actually setting out to do serious damage. So we need to find out the exact percentages there.

A number of research programs are being carried out. We have been working on the GAPP, we have been working on the community outreach work, obviously, with Crime Stoppers, and one of our colleagues, Dr Kate McDonald, with the police has done best practice work on intervention therapy for children who really do have serious issues with fire. In addition to that there are several other research programs we are doing. What was the one I was going to mention?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — The other group are the older people, usually single men, unemployed, living on the fringe of society, who often join the fire brigade, unfortunately, and the reasons that they engage in this behaviour are for recognition, to be a hero and a whole range of payoffs for them. They are often the first there to put the fire out, unfortunately. But the thing is, getting back to community education, when we talk to communities, in retrospect they know who this person is and they are not surprised, so if we can actually tap in and give the community confidence that we will not punish the propensity to light fire but help these people integrate back into society, then you are solving a lot of the problems.

Dr READ — Actually, on that — —

Ms DUNN — Which is a great segue to my next point. Sorry, Dr Read; go on.

Dr READ — On that point, often after a fire we have certain very emotional responses, which is understandable, but sometimes the communications that come out at the political level discourage communities

from reporting. The last thing a mother, a teacher or a Scout master is going to do is to report a child if they think they are going to be hung, drawn and quartered by the community — a virtual witch-hunt. So we need to be careful about the way we communicate post fire to the public. Yes, there are some people who are out to cause malicious damage, but there are also a lot of other people, particularly children, who when it comes to prevention we have to have a more nuanced way of communicating to the public about what is going to be done.

The really important thing about Crime Stoppers is that it is the one organisation that is capable of doing this because it is completely confidential. This is part of the education we need to get across to people, because people fear that if they report arsonists, there will be retribution. This is from the research we have been doing over the past 10 years into the various communities. So the confidentiality of Crime Stoppers and the fact that you can just report a suspicion rather than a confirmed crime is really key, because what we are on about here is prevention. If we do not prevent the rising incidence of severe bushfires, and bushfires linking together and creating mega-fires, we have to be able to allow our communities to make those communications to us in a way where they are completely protected and completely safe and completely confidential. By allowing them to bring that information to the fore, before the event, it links in with the operational efficiencies of police. Police, CFA et cetera need to be able to respond to things that are happening rather than suspicions. Crime Stoppers is the only organisation that handles suspected behaviour before the event.

Ms DUNN — Just on the issue of prevention and intervention, I am wondering whether you have done any research in relation to, I guess, the human services response to these young people. I do not know if the research indicates that they continue on with this fire-setting behaviour or not, but it would seem that that human services response is quite critical in those particular years of development, and I am wondering if you have done much work — —

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — You are absolutely right, yes. Paul with the CFA and other organisations — about 35 in Victoria, I think — have developed a referral system. But one of the problems is that when you get a highly disturbed child that is known to legal entities and human services, they do not come with one problem. They come with multiple problems, and often the fire lighting gets pushed down in priority a little bit and other things are addressed. It is so complex — the problems with a child that has been abused for many years — the treatment and the prevention is very complex for that child. The other thing is that if you go the legal way and prosecute these youth offenders, again it is like sexual abuse — the ability to get evidence and charge them without actually — because you do not wait until someone is watching you; you will go out in the bush and do it quietly yourself and then get the excitement of it. So often that charge is dropped and other clearly identified offences are actually taken care of. As we said, it is a whole approach where we need to raise how we understand this and how we address this in the future.

Dr READ — Do you mind if I just add to that? Just in terms of that broad landscape, we were working on the youth arson reduction program that Craig Lapsley launched. That did involve about 35 agencies coming together over the course of three years to develop a catch-all mechanism, because what was happening was that human services and the department of education, their brief does not cover arson and yet arson is bubbling up to the surface — sorry, bad analogy — in different —

The CHAIR — Among people for whom they have got responsibility.

Dr READ — Yes — in different organisations, but no-one has a way of capturing that information.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — No-one owns us.

Dr READ — So we were developing a referral network — a simple referral network — for all agencies to be able to start referring children who were showing those sorts of proclivities. If we were to take you through some of the case studies of children who were showing those sorts of proclivities, they are typical, they resonate with the same sorts of issues — parental alcoholism, unemployment, largely neglected children — and all of the same things resonate with each case. So they are known. We know who these families are. We need to be able to find ways of supporting them before they develop into — —

Ms DUNN — It escalates.

Dr READ — Yes.

Ms HUNTER — Can I just add that obviously arson is a very complex problem, but one of the other avenues that Crime Stoppers is exploring is the issue of recklessly lit fires, which is one that is a basic education. There are fires that are either started by people leaving camp fires unattended or by farmers using slashers on days when they know they should not. These are not complex problems to fix; these are problems of community education. So while arson and the drivers of arson is a very complicated issue, some of the bushfire preparedness is very simple and it is really about simple community education about what not to do and who to tell if it is being done.

So we all know the farmer in the western region who had three fires start on his property in a week because, you know, every couple of days he would fire up the slasher. Those are the people that we need to target. Those are the neighbours that we need to say, 'Next time he does it, you know what to do'. There is a whole range of recklessly lit fires, but the driver behind them all is either ignorance and unawareness of the situation. In terms of some of our CALD communities going into the bush, they are just absolutely unaware of the implications of lighting a fire are. Some of it is very simple community education and the community understanding what the call to action is, and then there is the very complex issue of arson, so we are working on two fronts there at Crime Stoppers.

Dr READ — Yes. They are part of the same — —

The CHAIR — I am just conscious of our time.

Ms HUNTER — We could talk all day about it!

Ms BATH — And most of us could listen all day too!

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Thanks to the witnesses. Just a question as an ex-detective: you talk about the prevention side and talk about the complexities of individuals. There is a whole range of people that end up in the court system or in jail for a whole range of reasons, not necessarily just for arson. So my question really goes to the analytical side of the information that you receive. Where and how is that analysed? Because obviously analysts are within the police organisation. How is that coordinated? If, for example, you have a high-risk needs individual, youth, Crime Stoppers, local police, local communities — I am trying to reconcile where everything fits into the one group and I do not quite understand where that is.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — Obviously there are different pathways for different information and about who gets this information, and this is one of the things we are hoping to do with the research grant we have just been given: actually do far better coordination, because at the moment we seem to act in silos. The police do not get all the information about the fires that the CFA believes are suspicious and the data gets lost, so there is a real program we are hoping to initiate, with the support of Crime Stoppers too, to actually get this data integrated, get the messages coordinated and get everyone up to scale with just what is happening, why it is happening and who should be doing what.

Dr READ — In essence what we are talking about is trying to enhance that exact area. There is not enough of it done. There is not enough data harmonisations and not enough coordination. The GAPP model is a fantastic model that can be scaled to be able to capture more information. The work that Crime Stoppers is already doing across the CFA and police, that is fantastic work. But at the moment, when it comes to human services et cetera, this is an idea in development. It does not exist yet. So that is where we need to put some effort.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I still do not understand, but obviously this is the first day of hearings.

Ms HUNTER — Are you wondering about the data that is given to Victoria Police?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — And the data from human services, the data from the prison system, the data from the Children's Court.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — It goes everywhere at the moment.

The CHAIR — Is there anywhere in the country that does this — or elsewhere internationally?

Dr READ — No. In fact — —

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — New South Wales is approaching a better model.

Dr READ — New South Wales is doing a great job. Western Australia is doing a great job. We have been trying to get the same sort of data harmonisation system in Victoria as Western Australia. In addition to that, I might also say that on crime reporting of arson in general up until 2012 there was not one single study internationally. The only studies are happening in this group right here. When we talk about the information being captured by human services, it is not happening. None of it is happening. It can.

Ms HUNTER — My understanding is that it is the first longitudinal study of arson —

Dr READ — That is exactly right.

Ms HUNTER — and community attitudes in the world — —

Dr READ — The research that Crime Stoppers has been initiating.

Ms HUNTER — Yes. So it is really important and exciting work that we are conducting.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — I do not who said it, but one of you in giving evidence said that people who join a particular volunteer organisation, the CFA or a fire organisation — it is after the event that people say, ‘Yes. We always knew he or she’, predominantly he, ‘was going to be this person’. I am querying processes of checks. Obviously they have brought in checks for working with children, for the obvious reason. There are no such equivalents for working in those types of organisations — the fire organisations or the industry — that you are aware of?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — Not broadly, but Bond University is working on how to screen CFA volunteers at the moment. But there is a real tension there, because we are very under-resourced with volunteers in the CFA. If you start putting barriers to getting people and putting people off because we want to investigate them, there is the real problem that the CFA believes that they will not get the people. So this is a difficult decision and this scheme is not integrated right through and it needs to be.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Is it done elsewhere for organisations around the world?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — No.

Ms HUNTER — I think there is screening within the CFA. I think they would be best placed to respond to that, but I think you would also probably find that it is in the incidence, to use another crime example, of paedophiles. Often they will pass a working with children check and people are not caught on their first offence so there is usually long-term behaviour. But there might be flags that go up to communities and that is why we encourage anybody with any suspicion, whether they are part of a volunteer organisation or just a community member, if they have got any suspicions, then of course they can contact Crime Stoppers. Then if there are a lot of pieces of information, all of the dots can start being joined and you can see where there is a pattern of behaviour or a pattern of suspicion that can give the police obviously further interest in that person.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — But we know, though, if it is a murder-related case, it clearly goes within a certain section of the Victoria Police organisation, but — —

Ms HUNTER — Where does our information go?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes.

Ms HUNTER — Within Victoria Police?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes. But if it is somebody who you suspect is an arsonist, I do not get the feeling that it goes to — is it the arson squad now? I do not know even know what it is called now.

Dr READ — No, it only goes to Crime Stoppers.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — What is it?

Ms HUNTER — Arson and explosives squad?

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Do they have the analytical people there? Again I am sort of — —

Dr READ — Is there an analytical back end to the Crime Stoppers reporting?

Ms HUNTER — Yes. When a report is submitted to Crime Stoppers, it gets entered into the Interpose system and then it will be referred to the most appropriate place within Victoria Police. That is designated by the police, where that would go to, and that would, I assume, be either — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — When we assume, as Benny Hill would have told you once years ago — —

Ms HUNTER — Well, yes. Once Crime Stoppers passes it on to Victoria Police it becomes their data.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It falls out of your bailiwick, so it might be worthwhile getting the police to give evidence here.

Ms HUNTER — But there definitely is an arson and explosives group.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Yes. Arson and explosives.

Dr READ — A very quick point on your other question about being able to screen for arson, it goes to recidivism of arsonists. Only about 1 per cent of arsonists have lit a fire in the past. That is very low. They are generally versatile criminals if they are adults, and alcoholism and violence are usually the things that we get them for.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — All right. Thank you.

Ms BATH — I would just like to reiterate the Chair's comments and say how highly commendable Crime Stoppers is in terms of fire prevention. I know Professor Stanley and Dr Read have been endorsing your body and the body of work that you do. I also note that you mentioned the \$300 000 that you have received over recent years as a result of the royal commission's recommendations and the leverage that occurs in terms of prevention and advertising is up to a million dollars. I guess my question relates to: we have heard how important Crime Stoppers is to the community. I live in Gippsland and that is my region so I am very familiar with the issues in relation to Black Saturday. What are you doing to champion your cause on a government stage in order to get this funding continued, because the work that you are doing is so very important for our communities?

Ms HUNTER — Well, if you want to talk about government funding. Crime Stoppers receives no ongoing government funding, so we are reliant on project-based campaigns like bushfire arson. We provide on average 35 per cent of all police intelligence holdings each month, so 35 per cent of all intel goes via Crime Stoppers, via the community. Obviously we are a vital part of the intelligence network and obviously a part of the community safety. We would always encourage the government to look at providing some consistent funding to ensure our sustainability, because we do see ourselves as a very important player in the community safety space for Victoria.

Ms BATH — The other comment I would get you to comment on is your third recommendation, Professor Stanley, which is, 'We recommend that a body on bushfire prevention be established'. In terms of the players in that, or the stakeholders — again Crime Stoppers would be an integral part of that, I would assume — you have said there should be 'representation, resources and authority'. Can you make a comment on that? I guess the other thing is that under that umbrella would be that data harmonisation would come right into that, and that would be very important. You have touched on some important issues going forward, I think.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — Just as we were saying no-one really owns arson — it is disaggregated into all little bits in all different organisations and people with an interest in it — no-one actually owns bushfire prevention, so there is no holistic view about what should be done, how we can coordinate what should be done, how we can get all the players together with an interest in this to get a coordinated plan, a long-term plan and then do some monitoring and evaluation about what is actually working, what is the best way to approach this. So we believe that such a body should be there because the problem, if the temperature continues to rise and the conditions in Victoria are changing, as they are, is that it is possible in a few years time we could get a Black Saturday every two to three years. This is the scenario we are looking at, and the response needs to lift to actually address the problem that is before us and will continue to get worse. So that is roughly it.

Mr RAMSAY — Just quickly, you have identified the issue around the importance of continued funding for Crime Stoppers, which plays a very important role in the community. I have been working with you, Sam, on a number of occasions in relation to the work you have been doing. You have talked about the holistic approach of an overarching body to collect the data in relation to the work you are doing. I am just wondering: what other resources do you see — this is an opportunity to put it on the Hansard transcript — are needed to prepare the state for bushfires in Victoria, just briefly, given the time constraints?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — Other resources in relation to —

Mr RAMSAY — We have talked arson.

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — prevention?

Mr RAMSAY — Yes. Just about bushfire preparedness, preparing the state for bushfires. Is it an increase in firefighter resource? Is it an increase in equipment resource, in data collection in relation to risk across the state? Are there any priority areas you want to identify?

Assoc. Prof. STANLEY — Yes. Our particular interest is the human side and preventing people igniting the fires. At the moment there really is in Australia no proper treatment centre for people who are identified arsonists. There is not the preventive work to actually move the children who we are concerned will go on to light fires, to put a proper program around that, a dedicated program. So it is a combination of a range of things that actually lead to a wide-span approach to prevention. And of course we need to understand there is a whole lot more. Our state of knowledge around bushfire generally and arson is abysmal.

Dr READ — For example, the youth arson reduction project is basically sitting gathering dust at the moment. It is not being pursued. A lot of volunteer hours were put into the development of that, by some very clever people, based on a world-class treatment system which itself is gathering dust, not being used. It is all sitting there, but as I said before, it all requires funding and direction and recognition.

I might also just like to mention — I am going to make a complaint — that a couple of years ago when we were talking about the money that was being put into the GPS manacles after the event — —

The CHAIR — GPS?

Dr READ — GPS tracking devices. That was in my opinion a waste of money compared to what could have been done with those organisations that were truly making a difference. That was a complete waste of money at that time. That is my opinion.

Ms HUNTER — I think my view is that we are looking at another bushfire season in the face of increased community complacency, and it tends to happen. Each year far less people are going to community fireguard meetings. The further away Black Saturday is, the more people rest on their laurels, the harder they are to engage. I think that there needs to be a renewed look at it. I do not think the communication strategy that the fire agencies are using at the moment is particularly effective, and some of our research is bearing that out, where we still have pockets of communities that are not heeding the warnings.

This is about being prepared, not necessarily just about reporting. People are not engaged in the message, and each time, as it gets further and further away from a catastrophic event, people get less engaged. As we know, an event like Black Saturday can have a devastating effect on the community and on loss of life. If you think about what we put into road trauma as opposed to an event like a fire, which can devastate many, many lives in one incident, I think maybe we are not really investing enough in preparing the community for those kinds of events.

The CHAIR — Can I thank the three of you for your evidence. It has been actually very enlightening and a very different way of preparing and thinking about this. Our inquiry is obviously into bushfire preparedness. That includes prevention but also logistics, manpower and all of those aspects as well — and the steps that can be taken ahead of time. Certainly the committee will want to draw on your resources as we go forward, and the secretariat will almost certainly be in contact to seek some further information. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.