



## Crop goes up in smoke thanks to tobacco tip-off

ATO, Victoria Police and the Australian Border Force (ABF), has seized and destroyed over 16 tonnes of illicit tobacco.

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The Australian Taxation Office (ATO), with support from Victoria Police's VIPER Taskforce and the Australian Border Force (ABF), has seized and destroyed over 16 tonnes of illicit tobacco, with an estimated excise value of nearly \$35 million.

Two search warrants were executed on Thursday 6 March at a property in Merrigum, Victoria. A search of the property revealed two illicit tobacco crops in excess of 13 acres, which is equivalent to almost 12 football fields in size.

ATO Assistant Commissioner Jade Hawkins commended the actions of those who initially alerted the ATO to the property.

'Community tip-offs are one of our best sources of information as they provide us and our partner agencies with crucial information to assist in the fight against illicit tobacco.'

'The significant outcomes of these raids are another positive step forward in the ongoing work to detect, disrupt and dismantle organised crime syndicates who use profits from illicit tobacco to fund other, more serious illegal activities,' Ms Hawkins said.

ABF Acting Commander Tori Rosemond said it is estimated organised crime groups control 75 per cent of the illicit tobacco market in Australia and it can generate significant profits.

'We are detecting and seizing massive quantities of illicit tobacco on a daily basis at the border, but this alone cannot stem the supply, which

is why we work side-by-side our partners to stamp out these home-grown illicit operations,' Acting Commander Rosemond said.

Victoria Police Detective Acting Superintendent Craig Darlow said, 'we have made it clear that we will target anyone at any level across the state who is involved in the distribution and sale of illicit tobacco, and that involves regional Victoria.'

'These seizures – and their potential value of almost \$35 million in avoided excise – are significant, and their impact will undoubtedly be felt by the organised crime groups operating in this state. They will also provide further avenues of enquiry for Victoria Police.'

'We are doing absolutely everything we can to target syndicate leaders, directors, facilitators and organisers responsible for this criminal offending to make involvement in illicit tobacco as unattractive a proposition as possible.'

'Disrupting these syndicates and putting a stop to their criminality remains a priority for Victoria Police and it is critical that we continue to work with our law enforcement partners including the ATO and ABF on this,' said Acting Superintendent Darlow.

This joint effort demonstrates the commitment the ATO, Victoria Police, and ABF share in combatting illicit tobacco production and protecting the community from the associated harms.

Complementing our support to the Illicit Tobacco Taskforce (ITTF), the ATO conducts additional operations to seize and destroy domestically grown and manufactured illicit tobacco crops.

Between 1 July 2018 and 30 June 2024, our Illicit Tobacco Team completed 90 operational activities. These included 19 ITTF (whole of government) operations, 31 ATO specific operations and 40 state law enforcement support operations.

These operations resulted in:

- 627 acres of illicit tobacco crops located, seized and destroyed with a total weight of 3,746,240 kilograms
- 39,224 kilograms of loose-leaf tobacco located, seized and destroyed
- 21,759,340 cigarettes located, seized and destroyed
- total estimated equivalent tobacco duty foregone value of above \$723 million

From July 2018 to January 2025 there have been 30 convictions by the ATO for illicit tobacco with sentences ranging up to 3 years imprisonment.

Every crop we seize and destroy, burns another hole in the illicit tobacco trade. We continue to disrupt the illicit tobacco trade by prosecuting those who are found to be domestically growing and manufacturing illicit tobacco.

This activity is a direct result of a tip-off from a community member to Victoria Police, who then passed it on to the ATO. If you suspect that illicit tobacco is being grown, manufactured, or sold in your community, you can confidentially report it to the ATO online at [ato.gov.au/tipoff](https://ato.gov.au/tipoff), or phone **1800 060 062**.

Visit [ato.gov.au/illicittobacco](https://ato.gov.au/illicittobacco) to learn more about the signs of tobacco plants and what to look out for in your community.

## Images


[Image 1](#) 

[Image 2](#) 

[Image 3](#) 

[Image 4](#) 

## Notes to journalists

A [high-resolution headshot](#)  of Assistant Commissioner Jade Hawkins is available for download from our media centre.

ATO stock footage and images are available for use in news bulletins from our media centre.

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