



Criminal syndicate left reeling after massive illicit tobacco bust

This is a joint media release between the ABF, Gold Coast Public Health Unit, AUSTRAC, ACIC and the ATO.

Last updated 25 August 2025

A huge haul of illicit tobacco, cigarettes and vapes have been seized in Queensland by the ABF-led Illicit Tobacco Taskforce (ITTF), crushing the operations of one of Australia's biggest illicit tobacco criminal syndicates.

The ABF-led investigation initially commenced in February 2025 following intelligence into a serious organised crime group under Operation Bear. The serious organised crime group is part of a network suspected of illegal tobacco importation, distribution, storage, transport and money laundering representing a significant threat to the Australian community.

The criminal network also operates tobacco retail outlets across the country which are known to sell illicit tobacco and vaping products, with profits suspected of being funnelled back into organised crime.

On 20 August 2025, officers from the ABF, the ATO, Gold Coast Public Health Unit, Gold Coast Joint Organised Crime Taskforce and Queensland Police Service Taskforce Masher, executed a warrant at a residential property in Tallai, Queensland - suspected to be used as a safe house, and seven storage sheds in Carrara, Queensland.

Across the two locations, the ABF and Gold Coast Public Health Unit together seized over 7.5 million cigarette sticks, approximately 218 kilograms of loose tobacco, 1 cash counting machine, 9kg Roll your own tobacco pouches, approximately 1,890 cigars and over AUD\$40,000 in cash.

The cigarettes and tobacco products seized had a total combined potential excise value of more than AUD\$10,993,000.

Also, during the searches, over 26,000 thousand vaping devices, over 500 vaping accessories and over 7 litres of vaping liquid, were seized, with a combined estimated street value of more than AUD\$1,325,000.

Illicit Tobacco and Vape Enforcement Commander Ken McKern said, 'by seizing these goods and shutting down their operations, we have disrupted this criminal activity and sent a clear message to the criminals behind this illegal trade.'

'Our intelligence-led taskforce brings together agencies and takes a collaborative approach to identifying, disrupting, and destroying the operations these criminals are running.'

'This is a major result for the ABF-led ITTF, and the close collaboration and intelligence sharing between agencies has yielded significant results and I congratulate all officers and agencies involved.'

'Border enforcement is only one part of the response to this growing threat, and we hope this outcome shows the ABFs dedication and capability to detect, seize, investigate and bring down the criminals behind illicit tobacco getting into the country.'

A Gold Coast Public Health Unit spokesperson said the growing and unacceptable levels of vape use in young people was extremely concerning.

'Vaping in Queensland high school students tripled between 2017 and 2023, so it remains vital that we continue to undertake these joint operations with agency partners.'

'The prevalence of illicit tobacco products and the related health impacts including serious lung and heart disease is staggering.'

ATO Assistant Commissioner Jade Hawkins welcomed the result of the joint agency operation.

'Significant results such as this would not be possible without the sharing of information and capabilities from the agencies involved,' Ms Hawkins said.

'The ATO is tackling illicit tobacco to ensure these funds are put into essential community services rather than the hands of organised crime.'

AUSTRAC National Manager Law Enforcement, Anthony Helmond said, 'financial intelligence plays a crucial role in law enforcement investigations.'

'In this case, AUSTRAC analysts were deployed along-side their law enforcement colleagues, allowing real time assessment of financial records on the ground,' he said.

'Through the ITTF, this type of collaboration and immediate sharing of information, helps to detect and understand the methods used by criminal networks and bring the perpetrators to justice.'

ACIC acting Executive Director Dr Katie Willis highlighted the critical role of the ITTF in keeping the Australian community safe from serious and organised criminals.

'The ACIC provides unique, actionable and insightful intelligence to inform operations such as these, so the ITTF can continue to dismantle criminal syndicates whose illegal activities cost Australia up to \$68.7 billion each year,' Dr Willis said.

The ABF-led ITTF combines the operational, investigative and intelligence capabilities of the ABF, Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, Australian Taxation Office, AUSTRAC and the Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions.

Investigations into the alleged illicit tobacco network are ongoing.

Anyone with information about the importation of illicit tobacco or cigarettes should contact Border Watch at abf.gov.au/borderwatch. By reporting suspicious activities, you help protect Australia's border and the community. Information can be provided anonymously.

Notes to journalists

- [Footage \(MP4, 409MB\)](#)  is available.

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