

# Customs and chemical precursors

A vital component of Customs community protection role is the detection of attempted imports and exports of prohibited drugs such as heroin, cocaine and ecstasy. Similarly, Customs places a high-priority on the detection of primary substances and chemicals used in the manufacture of illicit drugs. These substances and chemicals are known as precursors and Customs has detected precursors capable of producing over \$2 billion worth of illicit drugs in the past few years.

Why are precursors a problem? Many of the illicit drugs abused in Australia are usually manufactured overseas. However, amphetamines are manufactured in large quantities within Australia, usually in clandestine laboratories. Last year more than 150 laboratories were detected. This domestic manufacture requires large quantities of precursors.

As most precursors also have legitimate medical, therapeutic or industrial uses in Australia (see Table One for examples), they have been obtained in the past primarily through domestic diversion. Domestic diversion is where chemicals are taken from legitimate medical, therapeutic or industrial sources (such as chemists, pharmaceutical and chemical companies) through theft, deception or purchase.

State police, health departments and industry have worked hard to tighten controls on these precursors. This has increased the risk of their importation for illegal purposes which, in turn, has highlighted the need for effective controls on their import or export.

Consequently many substances that can be used as precursors are controlled by Customs at the border and there are strict penalties, including imprisonment for up to five years, for their import/export without an appropriate permit from the Therapeutic Goods

Administration (TGA) (see Table Two for the list of precursors covered by the criminal sanctions regime). TGA has policy responsibility for determining whether a substance that can be used as a precursor should also be a restricted import or export.

Australia's largest detection of illegally imported ephedrine, used in the manufacture of methylamphetamine, was made during a Customs examination of a sea cargo consignment from Montenegro, Yugoslavia. The consignment contained six pallets of ceramic tiles concealing 22 bags of crystalline ephedrine of approximately 25 kg each - total weight of 556.4 kg. The seizure represented an estimated five or more tonnes of five per cent pure street level methamphetamine tablets with an estimated street value of about \$2 billion dollars.

Other significant detections include:

- In 1997, 25 kg of pseudoephedrine was detected concealed in cement from South Africa;
- On 12 September 2000, 100kg of ephedra (containing 4.6 per cent pseudoephedrine and 1.6 per cent ephedrine) was detected in air cargo from the United States. The consignment was misdescribed, and led to the detection of a clandestine amphetamine laboratory in Western Australia; and
- In November 2000, 42kg of pseudoephedrine-based cold and flu tablets concealed in furniture arrived in sea cargo from Vietnam.

Between 1995 and 2000, Customs seized more than 2000 importations of methylamphetamine precursors (ephedrine, pseudoephedrine and ephedra). By weight, more than 85 per cent of the total seizures of precursors have come from seizures of over 100g of powder. By number of seizures, 80 per cent involve small quantities of medicinal and

herbal preparations - primarily dietary and health/fitness supplements from the United States where ephedra is available legally over the counter. In the case of smaller amounts being seized, international mail centres generate the majority of seizures.

Customs has also detected illicit importations of the precursors used in the manufacture of ecstasy and fantasy.

Customs is also working closely with state police to ensure the opportunities for illicit access to precursors is minimised. For example, Customs is a member of the Australian Bureau of Criminal Intelligence's Chemical Diversion network formed of representatives from all state and territory police services, the National Crime Authority, and a major pharmaceutical company. This network regularly exchanges intelligence and information on the diversion and illicit use of precursors.

Customs provides import data to several state police services that is used to identify areas of possible system leakage and to monitor compliance with codes of conduct. Customs intelligence is also shared with Australian and international law enforcement agencies through shared databases, the distribution of strategic assessments and through liaison officers.

Importantly, detections by Customs of illicit importations of precursors have resulted in several joint operations with state police that have uncovered laboratories manufacturing illicit drugs or led to the dismantling of methylamphetamine manufacturing and distribution syndicates. These operations have

had significant impacts on domestic manufacturing and distribution within Australia.

In a world-wide effort to control the international movement of precursors, Australian Customs is working with its international partners, and has represented Australian interests at international precursor control meetings held by Interpol and the United States Drug Enforcement Agency. An invitation to participate in a United Nations led international operation tracking and controlling the movement of precursors for cocaine has been made to Australian Customs. This invitation is being considered along with the possibility of an Australian commitment to another international operation tracking the movement of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine.

Suspect imports and exports of precursors can be reported to Customs through the 24-hour Customs Watch number 1800 06 1800. The Therapeutic Goods Administration (1300 020 653) or

Table 2 - criminal sanctions precursor chemicals requiring a tga licence/permit for import/export

Substance
Ephedrine
Pseudoephedrine
Ergometrine
Ergotamine
Methcathinone
Phenylpropranolamine (Norephedrine)
N-acetylanthranilic acid
3,4-methylenedioxyphenyl-2-propanone (PMK)
Phenyl-2-propanone
Gammabutyrolactone (GBL)
Piperonal
Safrole
Isosafrole
Phenylacetic acid
Any of the salts or esters of the above substances/drugs

www.health.gov.au/tga can provide advice on the prohibited status of precursors and any associated licence and permit requirements for their import/export.

Table One - some precursors & their legitimate and illicit uses.

Precursor Chemical	Legitimate Use	Illicit Drug Use
Pseudoephedrine	Cold/Flu preparations	Methylamphetamine
Ephedrine	Cold/Flu preparations	Methylamphetamine
3,4-methylenedioxyphenyl-2-propanone (PMK or 3,4-MDP-2-P)	In the manufacture of perfume components and as a laboratory reagent in organic synthesis.	Ecstasy (MDMA)
Isosafrole	Manufacture of piperonal; to modify oriental perfumes; to strengthen soap perfumes; in root beer and sarsaparilla flavours; also used as a pesticide.	Ecstasy (MDMA)
Piperonal	As a fragrance in perfumes; as a flavouring agent in cherry and vanilla flavours; in organic synthesis and as a component for mosquito repellent.	Ecstasy (MDMA)
Safrole (found in sassafras oil)	Flavouring and fragrance industry; soap manufacturing; production of piperonal.	Ecstasy (MDMA)
Gammabutyrolactone (GBL)	Production of pharmaceuticals and other intermediate chemicals which are in turn used in the production of toothpaste, photographic films, adhesives etc. Also used in paint strippers, metal cleaners, ink stain removers, CD cleaners and in textile processing	GHB (Fantasy)