



Stopping the traffic of illicit drug precursors

Protecting the Australian community through the interception of illicit drug precursors is a high priority for Customs.

Customs recognises that stopping the importation of illicit drug precursors—that is precursor chemicals used in the manufacture of illicit drugs—into Australia is an important step in helping to decrease the domestic manufacture of illicit drugs.

Customs role and the legislation

Australia is signatory to the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances 1988. This imposes obligations on Australia in relation to the regulation of chemicals identified in the Convention.

In Australia, the Office of Chemical Safety within the Department of Health and Ageing has policy responsibility for determining which UN-listed substances (and which other substances not listed by the UN) are classed as prohibited imports and/or exports under Customs legislation.

The Office of Chemical Safety is also responsible for issuing licences and permits for these substances. Conditions may be attached to the import permit or licence, such as timelines (in relation to notification and movement of goods), and quantity thresholds. It is important to note that substances not listed in the *Customs (Prohibited Import) Regulations 1956* and the *Customs (Prohibited Export) Regulation 1958* may also be prohibited if they are immediate precursors to the illicit drugs and illicit drug precursors listed in the relevant Schedules.

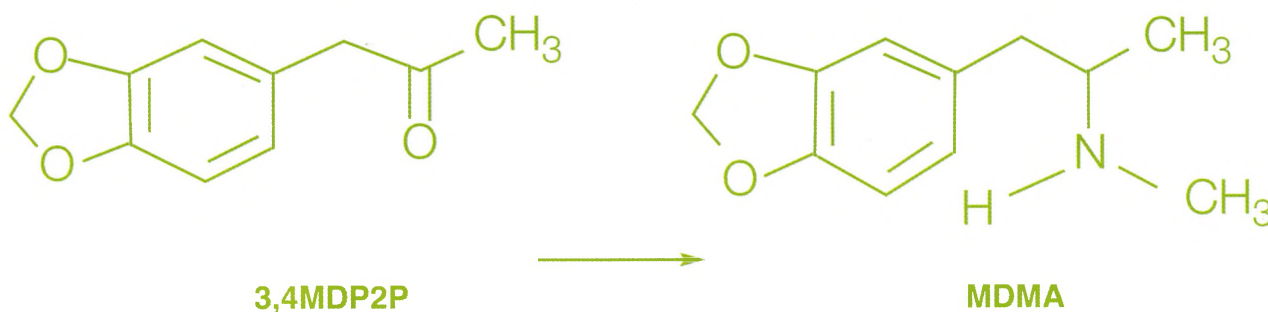
Since September 2002, all Table I and Table II substances listed in the UN Convention have been scheduled as prohibited imports, prohibited exports or both. Customs also applies sanctions to other substances that are not scheduled under the Convention, including the criminal sanctions substances, gamma-butyrolactone and methcathinone.



What is a (drug) precursor?

A precursor is a chemical or substance used as a starting material in the manufacture of another chemical or substances. For example, in the diagram below, 3,4 methylenedioxyphenyl-2-

propanone (3,4MDP2P), on the left, is a chemical precursor to 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDMA or Ecstasy) on the right.



Substances scheduled in the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances 1988.

TABLE I	TABLE II
ACETIC ANHYDRIDE	ACETONE
N-ACETYLANTHRANILIC ACID	ANTHRANILIC ACID
EPHEDRINE	ETHYL ETHER
ERGOMETRINE	HYDROCHLORIC ACID*
ERGOTAMINE	METHYL ETHYL KETONE
ISOSAFROLE	PHENYLACETIC ACID
LYSERGIC ACID	PIPERIDINE
3,4-METHYLENEDIOXYPHENYL-2-PROPANONE	SULPHURIC ACID*
NOREPHEDRINE	TOLUENE
1-PHENYL-2-PROPANONE	
PIPERONAL	
POTASSIUM PERMANGANATE	
PSEUDOEPHEDRINE	
SAFROLE	
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* The salts of hydrochloric acid and sulphuric acid are specifically excluded from Table II



There are a range of offences, both criminal and civil, that may apply to the import or export of illicit drug precursors. These offences are located in the *Customs Act 1901* (Customs Act) and in the *Criminal Code Act 1995* (Criminal Code), with breaches attracting a maximum penalty of 25 years imprisonment and/or a \$550,000 fine.

International cooperation and participation

Customs has bilateral agreements with a number of overseas Customs administrations. It exchanges information related to border control activities and policy and operational initiatives in relation to illicit drugs and their precursors.

Customs works with regional partners and has, in the last few years, delivered precursor awareness training courses in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Project PRISM

Targeting amphetamines—precursors

Launched in 2002 Project PRISM (Precursors Required in Synthetic Manufacture) is an international project aimed at preventing the diversion of chemicals used in the manufacture of ATS (Amphetamine-type stimulants) and ecstasy (MDMA).

The International Narcotics Control Board of the United Nations coordinates the project and Customs is the central national authority for Australia's participation. Customs is also a member of the Project PRISM Task Force, the governing body of the Project. In this capacity, Customs acts as the regional focal point for Oceania.

At the border

Customs uses a variety of techniques, such as trace detecting devices, detector dogs, container x-ray, intelligence analysis and other computer-based analysis methods to risk assess and screen the large number of passengers and huge volume of goods moving across the Australian border.

Significant detections of illicit drug precursors

Upon further investigation...

Customs targeted a container from Vietnam carrying ceramic statues. When it arrived at the Customs Container Examination Facility (CEF), Customs officers decided to take a closer look.

This was the beginning of a joint Customs and Australian Federal Police operation which resulted in the arrest of four men and the seizure of approximately 400 kilograms of ephedrine, a pharmaceutical drug often used to make methamphetamine, commonly known as speed.

The 74 boxes of ceramic statues were x-rayed and physically examined. Compressed powder—which test results confirmed to be ephedrine—was concealed inside the bases of a number of the statues.

Sometimes it's not the consignment itself...

When an air cargo shipment arrived in Brisbane from Thailand, the consignment seemed appropriately declared as ceramic vases. Customs officers were alerted when an x-ray examination of the vases revealed a large quantity of tablets.

The Customs search allegedly uncovered approximately 120,000 small white tablets concealed in a false bottom and sides of one of the boxes. The tablets were tested and found to be ephedrine.

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