

For Immediate Release

Illegal cigarette sales in BC funding organized crime

Metro Vancouver Crime Stoppers seeks tips on contraband tobacco

Vancouver, BC (September 20, 2017) – Illegal tobacco products are usually easy to identify, and Metro Vancouver Crime Stoppers is joining Crime Stoppers in Ontario and the Canadian Tobacco Manufacturer's Council in encouraging anyone with information to call in anonymously with tips about people trying to sell them.

These cigarettes are sometimes sold in bags or even in legitimate-looking packaging – but are missing the duty paid stamp to show that the product is legal with taxes paid. The price, compared to full retail, is also a giveaway.

Many suppliers are well-organized medium or large-scale operators often with criminal connections. The B.C. Ministry of Finance says these sellers often deal only with people they know and have been in business with for a long time.

The cigarettes may have been legally manufactured in the U.S. and smuggled into the country to avoid Canadian taxes, or unlawfully made right here in Canada. They may also be international brands entering the country illegally via sea container, or even stolen from convenience stores.

"On the surface it may seem a victimless crime, but it isn't," says Linda Annis, Executive Director of Metro Vancouver Crime Stoppers. "When you buy tobacco from an underground source, you're often helping fund organized crime, and that presents a public safety issue, plus you don't know where the tobacco comes from, or what's in it."

Sales of illegal cigarettes have been known to fund trade in illegal guns, encourage minors to smoke due to their low cost, and can even provide an introduction to gangs for school students wishing to make money selling them. Public Safety Canada has noted as much as 30 per cent of the tobacco consumed in Canada is obtained illegally.

"Contraband tobacco is illegal for a reason, and the sale of these products help fund organized crime, serving to make our communities less safe," says Sean Sportun, Director of the Ontario Association of Crime Stoppers. "Given the close connection between illegal cigarettes and its funding of criminal activity, it's important to educate and empower members of the community to safely make a difference by calling Crime Stoppers no matter where you are in Canada. We offer guaranteed anonymity and cash rewards for tips on all criminal activity, including contraband or illegal tobacco."

(more)

Here in B.C., the province collects \$700 million in tobacco tax revenues annually, but several million dollars are lost each year due to the smuggling of illicit tobacco. When the federal and provincial governments lose revenue as a result of illegal tobacco, it increases the tax burden for all of us.

In a 12-month period ending March 31, 2017, the Finance Ministry's investigation unit seized three million contraband cigarettes and prevented the loss of more than \$730,000 in tax. Much of it involved a single shipment of 2.85 million cigarettes thought to have been manufactured in Eastern Canada and the United States, and headed for sale on Lower Mainland streets.

Reporting Illegal Tobacco to Crime Stoppers

Metro Vancouver Crime Stoppers is not the police. Tips to Crime Stoppers can be provided by telephone or online through a secure server, texts, or free mobile apps. Tips from the public are passed on to authorities to investigate.

We don't record phone calls, log IP addresses and we don't need to know your name. Tipsters are provided with a code number and if their information results in a charge, arrest, the seizure of stolen property or illegal weapons, or the denial of a fraudulent insurance claim, a reward of up to \$2000 may be offered.

About Metro Vancouver Crime Stoppers

Metro Vancouver Crime Stoppers is a non-profit society and registered charity that receives anonymous tip information about criminal activity and provides it to investigators in the communities of Metro Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. <http://www.solvecrime.ca/>

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For media inquiries please contact:

Trevor Pancoust

tpancoust@pacegroup.com

604-646-3567