



Black market cigarette smuggling cost retailers half a billion euro last year

by Colm Kelpie

RETAILERS wrote off almost €500 million in lost sales last year from black market cigarette smuggling, it was claimed yesterday.

Angry shop owners hit out at the Government, claiming not enough was being done to target criminals importing cheap tobacco to be sold at knock-down prices.

The 3,000-strong Retailers against Smuggling (RAS) group said around 4,000 jobs could have been created in the sector last year had sales not been hit by the illegal trade.

Spokesman William Hanley said: "Last year the loss of income through retailers due to smuggled cigarettes cost 4,000 jobs.

"What we are asking the Government to do is to bring in penalties that will deter criminals from getting involved in smuggling.

"The Government needs to wake up to the fact that they're losing so much revenue."

The group said tobacco sales can account for around 40% of retailers' incomes.

But Mr Hanley said smokers can buy a packet of 20 cigarettes on the streets from illegal traders for as low as €4, compared with €8.50 in shops.

Despite seizures by customs officers at the country's ports and airports, RAS maintains just one in 10 smuggled imports are caught.

Mr Hanley said retailers believe the lost tobacco sales was also having a knock-on effect on other produce.

RAS was set up in June with members ranging from corner shop-owners to big supermarkets such as SuperValu.

The Revenue Commis-

sioners said 135.2 million cigarettes with a retail value of €54.4 million were seized by customs officers last year.

So far this year around 60.6 million cigarettes worth €25.5m have been seized.

Smugglers come into the country chiefly from Eastern European and Asian countries.



Retailers against Smuggling members William Hanley, Benny Gilsenan, Joe Barrett, Martin Mulligan and Brian O'Carroll outside 'Helen's Corner' shop on the corner of Macken Street and Pearse Street, which recently closed down.