



Strengthening Customs Investigation Mechanisms Against Agricultural Smuggling: A Case Study of Red Onion Trafficking in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: Red onion (*Allium cepa* L.) smuggling from Malaysia into Indonesia through the Bengkalis border region in Riau Province represents a persistent challenge to national customs enforcement and agricultural market stability. The illicit trade undermines state revenue, distorts domestic commodity prices, and compromises the livelihoods of local farmers. This study examines the operational role of Civil Servant Investigators (Penyidik Pegawai Negeri Sipil/PPNS) under the Directorate General of Customs and Excise (Direktorat Jenderal Bea dan Cukai) in detecting, investigating, and prosecuting red onion smuggling cases in Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province, Indonesia.

Methodology: A qualitative case study approach was adopted employing observational research with structured field surveys and semi-structured interviews conducted at the Customs and Excise Supervisory and Service Office Type Madya Pabean C Bengkalis.

Results: Findings reveal that PPNS Customs investigators perform a complementary law enforcement function alongside the National Police; however, their effectiveness is constrained by an extensive and difficult-to-monitor maritime border, an insufficient number of qualified investigators (minimum Grade II/a requirement), frequent personnel transfers (*mutasi*), and budgetary limitations.

Conclusions: Strengthening customs investigation mechanisms requires institutional reform encompassing dedicated investigator career pathways, inter-agency coordination protocols, technology-assisted border surveillance, and legislative amendments to address jurisdictional gaps in agricultural commodity smuggling.

Keywords:

customs enforcement; agricultural smuggling; ppns investigators; red onion trafficking; indonesia; border security; bea cukai.

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INTRODUCTION

Agricultural commodity smuggling constitutes a significant dimension of transnational economic crime that simultaneously undermines state fiscal integrity, distorts domestic markets, and threatens food production systems. This illicit activity represents a complex challenge, often involving sophisticated smuggling networks that exploit regulatory loopholes and porous maritime borders to facilitate the movement of undeclared goods. In the Indonesian archipelagic context, the extensive coastline, spanning over 95,181 kilometers and comprising more than 17,000 islands, creates formidable challenges for customs border enforcement, making it difficult for authorities to maintain consistent surveillance across all potential points of entry (Ardana et al., 2025; Najiyati et al., 2024).

Within this challenging geography, agricultural smuggling thrives by capitalizing on supply chain vulnerabilities and significant disparities in commodity prices. Among these agricultural commodities, red onion—a staple ingredient in Indonesian cuisine and an economically important horticultural crop—has emerged as a recurrent target for illicit cross-border trafficking. The smuggling of red onions is particularly acute across the Strait of Malacca, a critical maritime corridor separating Riau Province from Peninsular Malaysia (Santoso et al., 2020). This trafficking route is driven by persistent demand-supply gaps, where smuggled horticultural products enter the Indonesian market, effectively undercutting local farmers who struggle with higher production costs. Consequently, the trafficking of this commodity not only challenges customs enforcement mechanisms but also poses a direct threat to the economic stability of smallholder farmers in affected regions. The structural conditions enabling red onion smuggling are fundamentally rooted in the persistent price differentials between Indonesian domestic produce and imported alternatives. Indonesian domestic production costs for horticultural commodities remain structurally elevated compared to Malaysian and Chinese counterparts—often due to localized inefficiencies, higher input costs, and varying supply chain overheads—rendering locally grown red onions economically uncompetitive when illicit, lower-cost supplies flood the market (Kementan RI, 2021; Sari et al., 2019).

These smuggled commodities enter the distribution network at artificially suppressed price points that local producers cannot match, effectively bypassing legal tariff barriers and sanitary-phytosanitary quality control standards.

The consequence of this illicit trade is a systemic dual harm: the Indonesian state suffers immediate losses in potential import duties and tax revenues, while domestic farmers encounter severe price depression. This market destabilization frequently discourages essential capital investment in local agricultural infrastructure, as smallholder farmers struggle to maintain profit margins against the persistent influx of contraband. These dynamics are consistent with the broader academic scholarship on the failures of agricultural import substitution and its associated criminogenic effects, where trade restrictions inadvertently increase profit incentives for transboundary smuggling networks (Anderson & Martin, 2005; Chaudhry & Tanvir, 2017).

Indonesia's legal framework for customs enforcement is fundamentally anchored in Law Number 17 of 2006 concerning Customs, which serves as the primary statutory instrument for regulating the movement of goods across national borders. This legislative architecture explicitly delegates dual investigative authority to the Indonesian National Police and to designated Civil Servant Investigators operating within the Directorate General of Customs and Excise. By fostering this dual system, the law seeks to leverage specialized expertise in customs-related offenses, thereby supplementing the broader law enforcement jurisdiction maintained by the National Police. The PPNS institutional framework is rooted in Law Number 8 of 1981 regarding the Criminal Procedure Code and is further operationalized through Government Regulation Number 43 of 2012, which delineates the procedures for coordination, supervision, and technical guidance. Unlike the general police apparatus, the PPNS operates as a specialized administrative law enforcement modality, empowered to handle technical regulatory violations and criminal acts within the customs domain (Disemadi & Roisah, 2019, p. 208; Hamzah, 2008; Sibarani & Asmadi, 2024, p. 336). This distinct status requires a sophisticated, hierarchical coordination mechanism with the National Police, particularly concerning the initiation of investigations and the submission of case files. Notwithstanding this robust statutory foundation, the practical operationalization of these investigative powers—particularly within peripheral and geographically isolated border regions—remains analytically underdeveloped in existing academic scholarship. While the literature extensively debates the theoretical allocation of investigative authority, there is a marked absence of empirical research detailing how PPNS Customs investigators navigate the immediate operational realities, institutional constraints, and complex field challenges inherent in securing Indonesia's expansive and porous maritime frontiers.

Bengkalis Regency, located at the northeastern tip of Riau Province approximately 80 kilometers from the Malaysian coast of Selangor and Pahang states, constitutes one of Indonesia's most vulnerable customs frontiers (Bengkalis, 2022; Sitorus & Saputro, 2023). The Customs and Excise Supervisory and Service Office Type Madya Pabean C Bengkalis (Kantor Pengawasan dan Pelayanan Bea dan Cukai/KPPBC Tipe Madya Pabean C Bengkalis) holds primary enforcement jurisdiction over this area. Despite the office's formal mandate, empirical research examining how its PPNS investigators engage with red onion smuggling cases—including their procedural authority, operational constraints, and institutional relationships—remains absent from peer-reviewed literature.

This study addresses that gap through a focused qualitative investigation. The central research questions are: (1) What is the operative role of PPNS Customs investigators in handling red onion smuggling offenses in Bengkalis?; and (2) What institutional and operational factors impede PPNS Customs investigators from performing their mandate effectively? The findings contribute to comparative scholarship on administrative law enforcement in developing archipelagic states, with broader implications for customs capacity-building policy in ASEAN border regions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study design Yin (2018) grounded in observational research (observational research) conducted through systematic field survey methodology. The case study approach is appropriate given the study's focus on a bounded contemporary phenomenon—PPNS enforcement practices—within a specific institutional and geographic context (Bengkalis Customs Office) where direct behavioral observation and elite interviewing yield richer data than survey instruments alone (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The research is descriptive-analytical in character, aiming to map and interpret the operative conditions of PPNS enforcement rather than to generate causal generalizations.

Research Location and Study Period

Primary fieldwork was conducted at the Customs and Excise Supervisory and Service Office Type Madya Pabean C Bengkalis, Riau Province, Indonesia. Secondary data collection encompassed enforcement records and statistics archived at the office from 2015 to 2017. The study site was purposively selected on the basis of its documented status as a high-risk entry point for agricultural commodity smuggling and its jurisdictional coverage of the Bengkalis Strait maritime corridor.

Data Collection Instruments

Primary data were gathered through semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) with three categories of informants: (i) PPNS Customs investigators stationed at KPPBC Bengkalis; (ii) senior supervisory officers responsible for anti-smuggling enforcement; and (iii) National Police (POLRI) liaison officers engaged in joint operations. Interview protocols were structured around the themes of investigative authority, inter-agency coordination, operational challenges, and case outcomes. Field observation was conducted during patrol activities and case documentation review sessions. Secondary data comprised official customs seizure records, case investigation files (Berita Acara Pemeriksaan), and relevant legislative instruments.

Sampling and Informant Selection

Informants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2014) targeting individuals with direct operational knowledge of customs investigation procedures and red onion smuggling enforcement. A total of twelve key informants participated in the study, comprising five PPNS investigators, four customs supervisory officials, and three POLRI officers assigned to the

Bengkalis maritime patrol unit. Theoretical saturation was reached following the ninth interview, with subsequent interviews confirming rather than extending emerging themes.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and field notes were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase protocol of (Braun & Clarke, 2006): familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo 12 software was employed to support systematic coding. Analytical validity was enhanced through member checking (returning coded summaries to key informants for verification), triangulation across data sources (interviews, documents, and observation), and peer debriefing with faculty supervisors at the Faculty of Law, Universitas Islam Riau.

Ethical Considerations

Research ethics approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee of Universitas Islam Riau. All informants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Personal identifiers were anonymized in transcripts, and institutional data were used solely for scholarly purposes in accordance with Government Regulation No. 43 of 2012 and Law No. 14 of 2008 on Public Information Disclosure. No confidential case files or law enforcement intelligence materials were reproduced in this publication.

RESULTS

Profile of Red Onion Smuggling in the Bengkalis Maritime Corridor

Enforcement records at KPPBC Bengkalis document a consistent pattern of red onion smuggling using small wooden motorboats (perahu pompong) and fiberglass speedboats that navigate shallow inter-island waterways to evade customs patrol vessels. Between 2015 and 2017, the office recorded 23 interception cases involving red onions, representing a combined estimated volume of 847 metric tons with an assessed customs duty value of approximately IDR 4.2 billion (\approx USD 294,000 at 2017 exchange rates). Seizures were concentrated in the months of August through November, corresponding to the domestic harvest gap period when Indonesian domestic supply is seasonally constrained and price differentials with Malaysian imports peak.

Typical smuggling operations involved consignments of 5–15 metric tons per vessel, disguised within general cargo manifests or transported without documentation under cover of night transits. In several cases, red onions were concealed beneath legitimate commodity shipments of fish, timber, or construction materials. The scale of undetected smuggling—estimated at three to five times the volume of intercepted goods based on informant accounts—suggests substantial enforcement gaps consistent with the structural constraints identified in the interviews.

Legal Basis and Investigative Authority of PPNS Customs

PPNS Customs investigators derive their investigative authority from Article 112 of Law Number 17 of 2006 on Customs, which designates certain Customs and Excise officers as civil servant investigators with authority to receive reports, examine evidence, conduct searches and seizures, summon and examine suspects and witnesses, and submit investigation files (Berkas Perkara) to the Public Prosecutor (Fitrah et al., 2021, p. 4; Pranadita et al., 2023, p. 257). This authority is exercised under the coordination and supervision of the National Police investigator (POLRI), pursuant to Article 7(2) of the Criminal Procedure Code (KUHAP), creating a structurally subordinate relationship that frequently produces coordination delays. Informants consistently noted that PPNS authority is subject to a critical institutional constraint: all investigation files must be forwarded through the National Police (POLRI) research and development function (P-21 clearance) before transmission to the Public Prosecutor. (Purwanto et al., 2025; Sanchez-Lopez, 2019, p. 23). This procedural gateway—intended to ensure investigation quality—frequently extends case processing timelines from weeks to months, during which seized goods require storage under customs bond, generating logistical and financial costs for the office (Natarén, 2011, p. 3).

Operational Role of PPNS in Red Onion Smuggling Cases

The operational role of PPNS Customs investigators in red onion smuggling cases is a multifaceted process that integrates proactive intelligence, maritime interdiction, and formal criminal prosecution. This role is structured around three primary functional pillars: intelligence-based detection and maritime interdiction, administrative investigation of suspect cargo and documentation, and, upon sufficient evidence, formal criminal investigation (Rahmawati, 2022). Intelligence-led operations represent the first line of defense, utilizing cargo manifest analysis, vessel tracking, and community-sourced information to identify high-risk transits (Budilaksono, 2020; Sitorus & Saputro, 2023). Customs patrol officers, who often lack formal PPNS status, spearhead the interception of suspected vessels at sea. This phase is critical, involving actions such as vessel stopping, inspection of transport documents, and securing physical evidence (Maulana, 2019). However, a significant operational bottleneck arises at the point of detention. Because patrol officers are legally precluded from conducting criminal investigations, the case must be transferred to qualified PPNS investigators (Ramadhan, 2017).

The transition from administrative detention to formal PPNS investigation is frequently hampered by fragmentation within the organizational hierarchy. Informants highlighted that this hand-off is often delayed due to the limited number of qualified PPNS personnel available on shift, creating a gap that smugglers exploit through procedural challenges or by discarding evidence (Ramadhan, 2017; Riadi et al., 2024). Once the transition is successful, the PPNS role shifts to the formal investigation phase: suspect interrogation, comprehensive analysis of trade documentation, and the preparation of case files for submission to the Public Prosecutor, as mandated by Law No. 17 of 2006 (Aprison et al., 2015). This investigative process is further complicated by the technical nature of customs offenses, which require specialized knowledge of trade regulations and maritime law—a burden that is often exacerbated by limited resources and technological support (Sitorus & Saputro, 2023; Suhana et al., 2023). The existing institutional design necessitates seamless synergy between land-based investigators and sea-based patrol teams, yet informants consistently identified this as the weakest link in the enforcement chain (Sitorus & Saputro, 2023).

Institutional Constraints Inhibiting PPNS Effectiveness

Thematic analysis of interview data identified five primary institutional constraints:

(a) Geographic Scope Mismatch: The KPPBC Bengkalis supervisory area encompasses 2,966 km² of land territory and approximately 7,160 km² of maritime surveillance zone, vastly exceeding the operational capacity of the six patrol vessels maintained by the office. Informants described the surveillance zone as 'impossible to cover comprehensively with available assets,' creating predictable blind spots exploited by smuggling networks (Anderson, 2006; Rowlands et al., 2019)

(b) Investigator Grade Requirements: Government Regulation No. 43 of 2012 stipulates that PPNS Customs investigators must hold a civil service grade of at minimum II/a and have completed specialized investigative training (Diklat PPNS). In Bengkalis, the pool of grade II/a and above officers eligible for PPNS designation is structurally limited because the majority of senior officers occupy structural managerial positions that exclude concurrent field investigative duties (Aksan & Ibrahim, 2025; Millar et al., 2021, p. 1075).

(c) Personnel Rotation Policy: The Directorate General of Customs and Excise applies a mandatory rotation (*mutasi*) policy requiring officers to transfer assignments every two to three years. While designed to prevent institutional corruption, this policy disrupts the accumulation of local intelligence, erodes established inter-agency relationships, and creates recurring voids in PPNS staffing that require reinvestment in training and authorization procedures (Ganapathy et al., 2021, p. 8; Ungar, 2016, p. 307).

(d) Resource Deficiencies: Operational budgets for patrol fuel, vessel maintenance, and surveillance technology are described by informants as chronically insufficient for the scope of the surveillance mission. Several patrol vessels were reported as non-operational during field visits due to maintenance backlogs. The absence of real-time vessel tracking technology (AIS integration) further reduces interception probability. (Kurekin et al., 2019; Romero-Caicedo et al., 2025, p. 2)

(e) Inter-agency Coordination Deficits: Formal coordination mechanisms between KPPBC Bengkalis, POLRI Maritime Police, the Indonesian Navy (TNI AL), and the Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) are governed by individual memoranda of understanding (MoU) rather than integrated operational protocols. In practice, joint operations are event-driven rather than systematic, and information sharing between agencies is constrained by institutional data classification practices (Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2023, p. 105978; Sondakh et al., 2025)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate how structural deficiencies in Indonesia's administrative law enforcement architecture translate into functional limitations at the operational level of customs investigation. The case of red onion smuggling in Bengkalis is illustrative of a broader tension identified in the comparative literature between the formal design of multi-agency enforcement systems and their practical performance under resource constraints and jurisdictional complexity (McLinden et al., 2010; Wulf & Sokol, 2005)

The PPNS institution embodies a theoretically coherent design rationale: by extending investigative authority to technically specialized civil servants, the state can deploy subject-matter expertise—in this case, customs law and trade documentation analysis—within criminal investigations that general police investigators may lack (Hartono, 2019). However, as (Rosenbloom & Kravchuk, 2005) observe in their analysis of administrative law enforcement in complex states, technical authority without commensurate resource provision and organizational autonomy tends to produce institutional dysfunction rather than enforcement synergy. This dynamic is clearly manifest in the Bengkalis case.

The geographic constraint finding resonates with Kim & Tajima (2022, p. 836) analysis of enforcement agency capacity in border regions, which demonstrates that the ratio of surveillance assets to jurisdictional area is among the strongest predictors of enforcement effectiveness. The Bengkalis data—a six-vessel fleet covering over 7,000 km² of maritime space—represent a coverage deficit far exceeding the thresholds identified in Chalfin's comparative framework. Addressing this deficit through asset investment alone would be cost-prohibitive; the literature suggests that risk-profiling systems and intelligence-led patrol protocols can substantially improve detection rates without proportional asset expansion (Keen, 2012; Widdowson, 2007)

The investigator grade requirement constraint reveals a fundamental misalignment within Indonesia's merit-based civil service architecture. While the requirement that PPNS Customs investigators hold at least a Grade II/a civil service status is intended to ensure a baseline of professional competence, it inadvertently functions as a structural bottleneck. In practice, the prevailing career development model necessitates that officers advance from field-level technical and investigative roles into structural management positions to achieve higher civil service ranks (Mubarok, 2022; Purnomo, 2022). This upward mobility mechanism effectively strips the field of its most experienced, technically proficient investigators, who are compelled to abandon active investigative duties to pursue administrative advancement (Shane, 2010). This systemic issue is not unique to Indonesia; analogous findings regarding the attrition of experienced investigative personnel have been reported in Malaysia (Hamid & Azmi, 2018), (McLinden & Durrani, 2013, p. 1), and throughout various ASEAN customs administrations, suggesting a regional pattern that warrants coordinated policy attention regarding the development of specialized investigative career pathways (McLinden & Durrani, 2013, p. 1).

The personnel rotation finding presents a structural dilemma: the same policy that reduces corruption risk simultaneously degrades investigative effectiveness. This trade-off is recognized in the anti-corruption literature but rarely operationalized into enforcement reform proposals. The Bengkalis data suggest that a bifurcated career pathway—preserving general officer rotation while establishing a specialized investigator track with extended tenure and enhanced anti-corruption oversight—could reconcile these competing imperatives. Several customs administrations in the European Union employ analogous arrangements (Lysyi & Gelemey, 2025; Michael & Moore, 2010, p. 8).

The inter-agency coordination deficit identified in this study has particular salience for regional security architectures. ASEAN's Framework Agreement on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Customs Matters (2012) provides a platform for bilateral

customs cooperation between Indonesia and Malaysia, but enforcement of the agreement at the sub-national operational level remains inconsistent (Mayasari et al., 2025; Shahrullah et al., 2025, p. 614) The absence of integrated maritime patrol protocols in the Bengkalis-Malacca Strait corridor leaves enforcement dependent on ad hoc bilateral communication rather than systematic joint operational planning.

From a legislative perspective, the current statutory framework governing PPNS Customs investigators—primarily Law No. 17 of 2006 and Government Regulation No. 43 of 2012—was drafted prior to the substantial expansion of maritime smuggling networks documented in the post-2010 period. The framework's procedural requirements, particularly the mandatory POLRI coordination gateway, were designed for an era of slower, more predictable smuggling patterns. Contemporary trafficking operations—characterized by rapid vessel movements, decentralized networks, and real-time communication—require a legislative update that streamlines investigation authority while maintaining accountability safeguards.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that PPNS Customs investigators at KPPBC Bengkalis occupy a legally significant but operationally constrained role in the enforcement response to red onion smuggling. Their mandate to investigate smuggling offenses under Law No. 17 of 2006 is formally comprehensive, but practical effectiveness is systematically impeded by geographic scope mismatches, investigator eligibility bottlenecks created by the Grade II/a requirement, the countervailing effects of mandatory personnel rotation policies, chronic resource deficiencies, and fragmented inter-agency coordination mechanisms. These constraints are not isolated to Bengkalis but reflect systemic characteristics of the PPNS institutional model as applied to maritime border enforcement contexts. The findings support three principal policy recommendations. First, Indonesia's Directorate General of Customs and Excise should develop a dedicated PPNS investigator career pathway that maintains field tenure while applying enhanced integrity oversight measures, thereby addressing the expertise attrition produced by current rotation policies. Second, the statutory procedural gateway requiring POLRI coordination before criminal investigation commencement should be reformed to permit autonomous PPNS investigation initiation for designated customs offenses, subject to expedited POLRI notification. Third, the government should prioritize investment in integrated maritime surveillance technology—specifically real-time AIS vessel tracking and patrol route optimization software—to address the coverage deficit in high-risk corridors such as the Bengkalis Strait.

This study is subject to limitations inherent in its single-site, qualitative design. The findings may not be fully transferable to other Customs office contexts, particularly those with different geographic configurations or institutional resource levels. Future research should employ comparative multi-site designs across Indonesia's five highest-risk customs frontiers to assess generalizability and identify site-specific moderating factors. Quantitative evaluation of enforcement outcome data over extended time series would also strengthen the causal inferences that the present study's design precludes. Strengthening customs investigation mechanisms against agricultural smuggling is ultimately a matter of institutional design alignment: matching organizational capacity, legal authority, human resources, and inter-agency coordination frameworks to the realities of contemporary illicit trade. The Bengkalis case provides a richly documented diagnostic of where these alignments currently fail and, by implication, where targeted reforms hold the greatest promise for enforcement improvement.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The study was conducted as part of an undergraduate thesis requirement at Universitas Islam Riau. No commercial, financial, or personal relationships influenced the design, conduct, or reporting of this research. The views expressed are solely those of the authors and do not represent the official position of the Directorate General of Customs and Excise of the Republic of Indonesia.

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