70-80 Tons Of Pot Seized

NEW IBERIA — Four out-of-staters have been arrested in what officials say is the biggest marijuana seizure in the continental United States.

Between 70 and 80 tons of marijuana, with an estimated street value of $112 million, was confiscated Wednesday night from a sea-going barge at the Intracoastal Canal near Bayou Sale in St. Mary Parish.

The contraband, believed to have come from South America, was impounded at a privately owned loading dock at the Port of Iberia, where investigators held a press conference this morning.

The bust follows an investigation begun in August by U.S. Customs agents, the Louisiana State Police and sheriffs’ officers off Terrebonne, Lafourche and Iberia parishes.

Four persons who were on the tugboat pushing the pot-laden barge were arrested and charged with possession with intent to distribute more than 100,000 pounds of marijuana.

Officials say they may make more arrests as the investigation continues.

Police identified those arrested as: 53-year-old Harry David Hart Jr., a boat captain who listed his address as 2316 S.E. 19th Place, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; 27-year-old James Pat Kilcoyne Jr., a deck hand who gave his address as 726 Edison Drive, Anniston, Ala.; 32-year-old Michael Peter Dunan, a musician who resides at 7270 S.W. 39th Terrace, Miami; and 50-year-old Judson Ellsworth Hopia Jr., a self-employed businessman of 2201 S.E. 18th St. No. 107, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

The four men were booked into St. Mary Parish jail, then taken to federal district court in Lafayette. Bond had not been set at press time today.

U.S. Customs agents say they alerted state police in early August of a possible drug smuggling investigation stemming from the La Rose area.

They kept one motor vessel and an ocean-going barge under surveillance until Wednesday at 7:30 p.m., when officers boarded the tugboat, “Trooper,” and the sea-going barge and found the concealed pot.

The tugboat and barge, in addition to the marijuana, were confiscated and impounded at New Iberia.

“Our problem now is how we’re going to offload it and how we’re going to dispose of it while maintaining adequate security,” a state police officer said.