Agents Arrest Four, Seize Gator Hides

SLIDELL, La. (AP) — Undercover agents posing as alligator hide buyers arrested two cousins from Alabama and seized 25 sacks of hides worth about $400,000, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said.

And offers made by the cousins during the "sting" led to the arrest of two more relatives and a search for a fifth, officials said.

While our buyer was appraising the skins, the two suspects kept saying they could sell us automobiles, cocaine and marijuana which they had in warehouses in Alabama," said David Hall, special agent in charge of the Fish and Wildlife Service's office in Slidell.

The 345 hides seized Monday near a mobile home park near Slidell about equal the number that may legally be taken north of Lake Pontchartrain during the hunting season, he said.

Hall said it was one of the biggest poaching operations he had ever seen.

Dennis Alford Buzbee and Leslie E. Buzbee, both of Spanish Fort, Ala., were booked with violating the Lacy Act, which prohibits interstate transportation of alligator hides, the St. Tammany Parish sheriff's office said.

They admitted to killing about 100 alligators a night in Alabama and bringing the hides to Louisiana for sale, investigators said.

Alligator hunting is legal only in parts of Louisiana and Florida, and sale of the skins is strictly regulated. Each skin must be tagged, and only a certain number may be taken from a given area.

Arrested at an undisclosed location in Alabama were Dennis Buzbee's father, Alford, and Leslie Buzbee's father, Leslie, authorities said. Still at large was Johnny Buzbee, Dennis Buzbee's brother, officials said.

No age or address was given for those three.

Officers with search warrants obtained from a federal judge in Mobile confiscated stolen property including automobiles and outboard motors from several locations, Hall said.

Hall said the arrests culminated a three-month investigation which began with a tip from persons legitimately involved in the alligator hide trade.

Officers of the Fish and Wildlife Service, St. Tammany sheriff's office, U.S. Customs bureau, U.S. Park Service and state Department of Wildlife and Fisheries took part in the investigation and raid.