BATON ROUGE port mecca for cocaine trafficking.

BATON ROUGE, La. (UPI) — The Port of Baton Rouge, the fourth largest port in the nation, has become a mecca for cocaine smugglers drawn to the area by lax federal enforcement and a lucrative college market, narcotics investigators said.

In a series article on the rapid escalation of cocaine traffic, the Baton Rouge State Times newspaper reported Wednesday city police confiscated almost 150 times more cocaine this year than in 1979.

Parish and city investigators have labeled the Port of Baton Rouge a major cocaine distribution point.

City police seized $590,000 worth of cocaine on local streets this year compared to just $4,000 last year. Investigators said the busy commercial port has helped make the city a major point for drug dealers to distribute cocaine.

“It is a very bad problem getting worse,” said Capt. Mike Barnett, head of the East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff’s Department narcotics office. “It’s not at the epidemic stage right now, but it’s getting pretty bad.”

Barnett said one of the reasons cocaine smugglers may find the Port of Baton Rouge attractive was because U.S. Customs has no investigative agents working regularly at the port.

“A ship could dock here, and with no spot check by customs or anybody else, a crew man could come ashore with a half million dollars worth of cocaine,” Barnett said.

Jack Redford, resident agent for the federal Drug Enforcement Administration, said another reason for the increase in cocaine smuggling in Baton Rouge was because Louisiana State and Southern universities were good markets for the drug.

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“With the two major colleges we have here, it is a seller’s market,” Redford said. “It’s really used in college.”

But because of the drug’s high price — between $2,000 and $6,000 per ounce depending on the quality — Redford said cocaine is the drug of the “fairly affluent” college students.