Dope Smugglers Move Operations To Bayous

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The drug smuggling trade in the Gulf of Mexico seems to be in an uneasy migration, shifting away from the more heavily patrolled Miami and Fort Lauderdale areas.

"There has been a dramatic increase of smuggling along the upper Gulf from the Florida Panhandle all the way to Texas," said Richard Wright, a spokesman for the U.S. Customs in New Orleans.

Florida has a lot of nice sand beaches but Louisiana's swampy, convoluted coastline has a lot of privacy, plus 6,000 miles of navigable canals, bayous and rivers.

"The Gulf Coast from the Florida-Alabama juncture all the way west to the Sabine River at the Texas border is the most porous area in the country," said Wright.

In the past two months, 183 tons of marijuana have been seized in Customs' Region 5, more than the 151 tons seized in all of fiscal 1979. Wright said the street value is $1 million a ton.

Region 5's coast extends from the town of Carrabelle in the Florida Panhandle, across Alabama, Mississippi and most of Louisiana.

The Coast Guard estimates that an average of five tons of marijuana is brought in along the Gulf each day by ship, boat or plane.

Sometimes it is simply dropped in. A plane, usually an old airliner, flies overhead. Bales of grass, 50 to 80 pounds each, are dumped on a field.

Commander Chuck Morgan, head of intelligence and law enforcement for the Coast Guard's 8th District, headquartered at New Orleans, recalls a coastal dweller who became incensed and called police when a bale of marijuana smashed through the roof of his house.

Investigators found that a DC-3 pilot had dropped bales for colleagues on the ground to pick up but his aim was bad.

With so much profit involved, the flow seems unending. Plug one hole, another one opens. Investigators often feel they are groping blindly — but now and then a little unexpected help crops up.

An example: a big and busy smuggling ring, with connections in Gulf and Atlantic states, South America and Europe, false business fronts, able to buy seagoing ships to bring in cargo, and trucks to deliver it.

Drug Enforcement Administration agents in New Orleans acknowledge they didn't even know of the ring's existence until Russell L. Janes, 29, of Pensacola, Fla., who was helping truck marijuana around the country, told them about it and volunteered as an undercover man.

Thus far, Janes' pay-off for nine months of dangerous undercover work, plus three and a half days of testifying at a U.S. District Court trial in New Orleans, has been the conviction of just three men: Marion Earnest, Pensacola; Ted Sudderth, Cedar Creek, near Austin, Texas; and Kenny LeCompte, New Orleans.

"I shafted the organization for maybe $100 million because they got all confused and shut down for awhile," said Janes. "But they're back in operation — and it's like open season on me."

"I lost my — All I got out of it was a little self-satisfaction."

Earnest and Sudderth were each convicted on five counts — conspiracy to distribute, possession of 15,000 pounds of marijuana between June 20 and 22, 1979, intent to distribute 20,000 pounds of marijuana between June 25 and 27 — and two counts of using the telephone to distribute. They face a possible maximum punishment of 23 years in prison and $105,000 in fines.

LeCompte, convicted on the three possession and distribution counts, faces 15 years and $45,000 in fines.

They appealed and were free under bond — $100,000 for Earnest, $175,000 for LeCompte and Sudderth.

Janes, a truck driver by trade, is lying low somewhere in the west, trying to figure out how to earn a living but still be concealed from possible revenge.

More indictments and trials may result from Janes' work but Assistant U.S. Attorney Pat Fannin won't say who or when.

"All I can say is this matter remains under investigation," he said.