Intracoastal Canal Pot Bust Shows New Twist In Smuggling

NEW IBERIA (AP) — Officials say a $112 million marijuana bust near here is the biggest ever recorded in the country and is another sign that smugglers are trying a new twist in plying their trade.

The marijuana, 70 to 80 tons of it, was found piled seven feet high in a specially designed barge pushed by tugboat through a busy shipping channel, the Intracoastal Canal.

“More and more marijuana smuggling is being attempted by barge because of their tremendous payloads and because of their commonplace appearance in both the Gulf and the lower Mississippi,” said Dick Wright, a U.S. Customs spokesman.

“A unique feature of the seized barge showed real smuggling sophistication,” he said.

“A metal chute had been welded from the hull into the inner hull. The chute was complete with rollers and could be tilted to either load or unload the carefully wrapped bales.”

After making the bust Wednesday night, authorities were faced with another problem — how to get rid of the stuff.

“Our problem now is how we’re going to offload it and how we’re going to dispose of it while maintaining adequate security,” said Lt. Ronnie Jones of the Louisiana State Police.

Jones said four men were taken to the St. Mary Parish Jail at Franklin after federal and state agents boarded the tugboat Trooper near the Bayou Sale Bridge in St. Mary Parish.

He said the marijuana, found aboard a barge measuring 30 feet by 100 feet, originated in South America, but he did not know its destination. He said the tugboat and barge, in addition to the marijuana, were impounded in New Iberia.

Jones identified the four suspects as James P. Kilkenny, 28, of Anniston, Ala.; Michael P. Dunan, 32, of Miami; Judson E. Hopia, 50, and David A. Hart, 53, both of Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

Wright said the four were held on federal charges of possession with intent to distribute marijuana and were arraigned before a federal magistrate in Lafayette.

He said the marijuana probably would be burned at the Cajun Co-op, a farm cooperative located near Bayou Teche, a waterway which cuts through south Louisiana.