The Louisiana Crawfish Farmers Association, which has been at odds with crawfish processors in the past, also professed no prior knowledge of the allegations. President Perry Lavergne says he learned of the investigation when The Times contacted him for a comment. "In fact, that was the first time we had heard of it," he says. Shortly thereafter, however, LCRA records were also subpoenaed.

Lavergne was hesitant to comment as a spokesman for the association. "Everybody's reluctant to give an opinion on this because it's so severe," he said.

He did, however, offer some personal observations. "I feel there has definitely been some unusual things in this industry. I feel farmers haven't been able to prosper like they should have. Whether it's related to this or not, I can't say."

Attorney Durand is surprised that the Justice Department is directing so much time and attention to the crawfish industry. "Its impact on interstate commerce is probably as close to zero as you can get. It's such a small industry," he says.

Durand estimates that 99 percent of the product is sold in the state. Normally, any effort would be generally brought against major corporations that impact a large market segment, according to Durand.

He has instructed his clients to comply fully with investigators, although such efforts will divert their attention from transacting business on a daily basis. "It's going to take a lot, but on the other hand, they're asking for everything, so they don't have to go and search for it. All they have to do is give them every piece of paper that's written on it," he says.

Friedman is in the process of compiling the requested information, but he says it will be costly to do so. "It's a matter of hiring accountants and spending money and putting records together," he says.

Jim Reh of Catfish Wholesale in Abbeville says it will
be tough to assemble all of the material and properly identify and catalog it in time. "To comply with this, I don't have enough days between now and June 11," he says. He estimates that his business alone will fill 50 cardboard boxes with records.

"This is so absurd, I can't believe it," he says. "I feel the public ought to know of the harassment that the federal government is causing the crawfish industry."

Rich's manager was told by a government official that his plant was not directly under investigation, but that fact is small consolation for him under the circumstances. "The government will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars and nothing will come of it," he says.

Barras reflects the frustration that began mounting as federal agents distributed the subpoenas last week and the implications became apparent. "It's hard when people are accusing you of something and you know you're innocent," Barras says. "When you're not guilty, I don't know what they can do to you."

The allegations have certainly caused the industry to sit up and take notice. Price-fixing has been alleged for many years by crawfish farmers and others, but such an extended investigation was unexpected. If the subpoenas are any indication, the courtroom proceedings will likely be extensive, long-lasting and far-reaching. As Lavergne says, "This sounds like something big."