CAMDEN -- Three Cumberland County fishermen and a seafood wholesaler who have played a role in reviving South Jersey's oyster industry are among six people indicted by a federal grand jury on charges they falsified catch records and sold illegally harvested oysters.

Oystermen Thomas Reeves and Todd Reeves, owners of Reeves Brothers in Port Norris, and company employee Renee Reeves are charged with falsifying reports of oyster harvests between 2004 and 2007 to show the company took in fewer shellfish than it actually did, according to the indictment unsealed Tuesday. The three defendants live in Port Norris.

Also charged in the indictment is Mark Bryan of New Market, Md., co-owner of Harbor House Seafood in Seaford, Del., and Pamela Meloney of Secretary, Md., who works for the wholesaler. The company operates a shucking plant in Port Norris.

The indictment charges Harbor House helped conceal the size of Reeves Brothers harvests by falsifying its records of how many oysters it purchased from the fishermen.

The indictment charges Reeves Brothers took in $600,000 from illegally harvested oysters during the three years in question.
The grand jury also indicted a third waterman, Kenneth W. Bailey of Heislerville, on charges of creating false landing records for excessive numbers of oysters he harvested in 2006 and 2007. The indictment charges Harbor House created another set of false records to conceal those harvests.

The defendants face up to 20 years in prison and hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines, if convicted.

The oyster charges are the first big case since Ignacia S. Moreno, assistant attorney general for the U.S. Justice Department's Environment and Natural Resources Division, and U.S. Attorney Paul J. Fishman announced in July a new push on environmental crimes in New Jersey.

The case comes out of an investigation by the national Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's law enforcement division and the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, officials said.

It's also one of the bigger cases since a shake-up in NOAA's law enforcement program led to the ouster of top fisheries cop Dale Jones. The agency appointed a retired federal magistrate to investigate complaints of excessive penalties levied on fishermen, and a number of those cases are now under review.

An employee who answered the telephone at the Harbor House plant in Port Norris declined to make company officials or lawyers available for comment.

The indictment charges Harbor House with obstruction of justice for allegedly giving investigators misleading records.
The case has idled a significant portion of the New Jersey oyster fleet. Federal marshals seized five boats used by the fishermen—Janet R, Amanda Laurnen, Miss Lill, Crab Daddy and Conch Emperor— that might be forfeited to NOAA if the owners are found guilty.

Another five vessels—Martha Meerwald, Louise Ockers, Linda W, Turkey Jack and Beverly Ray Bailey—were put under restraining orders that prevent their use until the case is resolved.

The indictment comes at a time when the oyster industry is on a continued upswing after years of efforts to restore historic shellfish beds, freshening them with new surf clam shells from the region’s seafood processing plants. Clamshells provide a new hard surface where baby oysters can anchor and grow to market size.

This year’s harvest could be one of the strongest in recent years, with an expected 90,000 bushels—one of the best years since the 1980s, according to professor Eric Powell of Rutgers University, who chairs the bay oyster restoration committee.