Researchers at Florida International University have been awarded a federal grant to investigate possible tax evasion and money laundering via international trade.

The two-year, $2 million grant will allow FIU professors John S. Zdanowicz and Simon J. Pak to look deep into U.S. trade statistics to explain pricing irregularities.

Since 1992, the pair has spotted an array of aberrations, including toothbrushes imported from the United Kingdom for $5,655 each and flashlights imported from Japan for $5,000 a piece. They have also documented diamonds shipped to Belgium for $3.08 a carat and bulldozers sent to Mexico for $528 a piece.

However, Zdanowicz and Pak have never been able to follow through to find out if the discrepancies stemmed from legitimate pricing explanations, simple clerical errors or illegal activity.

"We're excited to finally be able to clarify many of the questions raised in the past by our research," Zdanowicz said.

He said the money would be used to buy more powerful computers and hire necessary staff, including computer programmers.

Equally important, he said, the grant will help set up a multi-agency task force, including analysts from U.S. Customs, the Internal Revenue Service, the Commerce Department and the FBI.

He said the task force would supply feedback on the researchers' work that will help crack some of the mysteries.

Zdanowicz said he expects the research will at least lead to changes in U.S. government policy, including the way that the government keeps tabs on trade statistics.

He said the price discrepancies might also tell whether trading companies manipulate prices to avoid taxes.