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U.S. to probe proposed tobacco case remedy cutback

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. Justice Department has agreed to investigate whether politics influenced a recent decision to reduce the proposed sanctions in the government's racketeering case against cigarette makers, lawmakers said on Tuesday.

The agency's Office of Professional Responsibility plans to review the decision to scale back the proposed sanctions in the tobacco case from \$130 billion to \$10 billion, according to a letter the department's inspector general sent to Democratic lawmakers in Congress, made available by Rep. Henry Waxman of California.

Democrats including Waxman last week called for an investigation after government lawyers asked a federal judge to order the major tobacco companies to fund a five-year, \$10 billion quit smoking program if she found they violated racketeering laws.

The program was one of several legal remedies the Justice Department sought at the end of an eight-month civil racketeering trial. Government lawyers said it could be extended if a court-appointed monitor found continuing misconduct by the industry.

Still, the revised proposal provoked criticism from anti-smoking activists because it was far smaller than the 25-year, \$130 billion, quit smoking program backed by a smoking cessation expert who testified for the government.

A Justice Department official later said the cutback reflected an earlier court ruling that sanctions in the racketeering case were to address only future misconduct.

Targeted in the lawsuit, filed in 1999, are Altria Group Inc. and its Philip Morris USA unit; Loews Corp.'s Lorillard Tobacco unit, which has a tracking stock, Carolina Group; Vector Group Ltd.'s Liggett Group; Reynolds American Inc.'s R.J. Reynolds Tobacco unit; and British American Tobacco Plc unit British American Tobacco Investments Ltd.

The companies deny they illegally conspired to promote smoking and say the government has no grounds to pursue them after they drastically overhauled marketing practices as part of a 1998 settlement with state attorneys general.

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