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Wednesday, April 30, 2008 - Page updated at 08:10 PM

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Nonpartisan report criticized Louisiana ethics legislation

By **KEVIN MCGILL**
Associated Press Writer

New ethics rules touted by Gov. Bobby Jindal as a hallmark of his young administration actually make it harder to prove violations, a government watchdog group said Wednesday.

Lawmakers approved Jindal's legislation during the first of two special sessions he called soon after taking office in January. Jindal repeatedly decried Louisiana's corrupt image during his election campaign.

The problem, according to the nonpartisan Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, is in the wording of one bill: While existing law requires "reliable and substantial" evidence of wrongdoing in an ethics case, the bill that takes effect Aug. 15 requires a higher, "clear and convincing" standard in ethics cases.

The change will require the gathering of more evidence and could require the re-evaluation of cases now being investigated, the council said.

"It is clear is that this change will slow the prosecution of ethics cases already in the works, likely create a backlog of investigations and discourage violators from admitting guilt when they think the evidence of their offense is slim," the council said.

Critics of the administration have raised questions about the new language in recent weeks. Jindal, asked about the criticism Wednesday before the report's release, said he was not convinced there was a problem.

"I'm not an attorney," he told reporters. "My understanding is there is some disagreement between the ethics board and some of those members and our attorneys about what the appropriate standards should be."

Jindal said those concerned about the issue should make their case to legislators, who are now meeting in regular session. But, he said, he would veto anything that he believes weakens the new ethical standards.

The new ethics legislation included a host of lobbying restrictions, income-reporting requirements for public officials and bans on officials' contracts with government.

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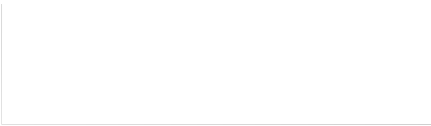
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