

FTC's Google investigation probed by Senate antitrust chief

March 31 2015, by David McLaughlin, Bloomberg News

The chairman of a U.S. Senate antitrust panel will look into the release of a confidential Federal Trade Commission report on an investigation of Google Inc.'s search business, which was closed in 2013 without an enforcement action.

Sen. Mike Lee, a Utah Republican who leads the Judiciary Committee's antitrust panel, also wants information about any conversations the agency or Google had with members of the Obama administration at the time, Emily Long, a spokeswoman for the senator, said in an email.

"We are not likely at this time to re-examine the underlying merits of the investigation, which was closed," Long said. "Our interest is in oversight."

Lee's review was prompted by the FTC's release of a portion of a confidential report on Google by the agency's staff that determined the company "unlawfully maintained its monopoly" over Internet searches and that its conduct harmed consumers.

The Wall Street Journal reported on the document earlier this month and on meetings at the time between White House and Google representatives. Bloomberg also obtained a copy of the document, which included only the even-numbered pages.

Lee plans to look into how the report was disclosed in response to a public-records request, said a person familiar with the matter who spoke

on condition of anonymity. He's also interested in whether the report provides a complete picture of the reasons the investigation was closed and whether the FTC should do more to explain the reasons for its action, the person said.

The senator doesn't plan to ask the FTC to reopen the investigation absent any new evidence, according to the person. A hearing isn't planned at this point.

"We look forward to discussing these matters with Senator Lee's office," said Justin Cole, an FTC spokesman.

White House spokeswoman Jen Friedman said administration officials regularly meet with business executives about a "range of issues."

"The FTC is an independent agency and we respect their independent decision-making," she said in a statement. "Our staff is cognizant that it is inappropriate to discuss issues relating to regulatory enforcement."

Google agreed in January 2013 to change some of its business practices following a 20-month antitrust investigation by the FTC into whether Google skewed search results to favor its own services. Jon Leibowitz, the FTC chairman who led the probe, defended the decision to close the matter, saying the agency conducted a thorough investigation. The commission voted 5-0 to close the investigation into Google's search practices.

Last week, three FTC commissioners - Chairwoman Edith Ramirez, Julie Brill, and Maureen Ohlhausen - said in a statement that their decision was "in accord" with recommendations by the agency's staff.

Google spokeswoman Niki Christoff declined to comment.

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