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Kaul warns ‘hundreds of millions’ from settlements at stake in lame-duck law standoff

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AG Josh Kaul is warning that an impasse between his office and GOP lawmakers over legislation passed during December’s lame-duck session could endanger “hundreds of millions” of dollars in lawsuit settlements.

But Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau, blamed Kaul for the deadlock Tuesday and said the Dem AG “continues to drag his feet.”

The Republican-controlled Legislature passed a law in December requiring Kaul to seek the approval of the Joint Finance Committee before settling lawsuits. The Dem AG and GOP members of the budget panel have clashed in recent weeks over how to proceed with settlements.

A dispute erupted two weeks ago over proposed confidentiality agreements the AG wanted lawmakers to sign before discussing details of a proposed settlement. JFC Republicans rejected that request and instead hired a private attorney to sign the confidentiality agreement on behalf of the committee, review proposed settlements and brief members.

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Not long after, Kaul’s office informed the budget panel that the deadline he had warned about earlier had been lifted, though the conflict has yet to be resolved and cases are not yet settled.

Kaul said Tuesday at Marquette University Law School that the state could face “serious consequences” if the Legislature is unable to resolve the dispute and called for the lame-duck law to be repealed.

“The easiest fix is just to get rid of this mess and clean it up,” he said.

Fitzgerald in a statement rejected that idea.

“The law is the law and isn’t changing,” he wrote. “He can work with us or be part of the problem.”

JFC Co-chair John Nygren, R-Marinette, added, “If Attorney General Kaul is worried about settlements he could work with the committee and provide them the information they need to make decisions. We are ready and waiting.”