By BRETT MARTEL

The Associated Press

Former NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue will rule this afternoon on the latest round of player appeals in the NFL's bounty probe, and any potential punishment will be delayed by a week, a person familiar with the decision said.

The delay is designed to give a federal judge in New Orleans the opportunity to rule on pending motions to throw out the suspensions and remove Tagliabue as the appointed arbitrator for the player appeals to the league, said the person, who spoke to The Associated Press Monday on condition of anonymity because no rulings have been announced.

The NFL's decision to delay potential sanctions for four current or former Saints also means linebacker Jonathan Vilma and defensive end Will Smith may play Sunday when New Orleans hosts Tampa Bay.

If the sanctioned players find Tagliabue's decision palatable, that could finally bring the bounty saga to an end more than nine months after the NFL first made public its probe of New Orleans' cash-for-hits program. If not, it will be up to U.S. District Judge Ginger Berrigan to disqualify Tagliabue or let his ruling stand.

Current and former Saints players and coaches have acknowledged the existence of a performance pool that rewarded key defensive plays including hard, legal tackles, but have denied organizing or participating in a program designed to intentionally injure opponents.

If Vilma, Smith, Cleveland linebacker Scott Fujita and free agent defensive lineman Anthony Hargrove get the ruling they seek, it would discredit an NFL probe — overseen by Commissioner Roger Goodell — which covered three seasons and gathered about 50,000 pages of documents.

The probe concluded that Vilma and Smith were ring-leaders of a cash-for-hits program that rewarded injurious tackles labeled as “cart-offs” and “knockouts.”

The NFL also concluded that Hargrove lied to NFL investigators to help cover up the program.

Vilma received full-season suspension, while Smith was docked four games. Hargrove initially received an eight game suspension that was later trimmed to seven games, but for practical purposes, was reduced to two games because he was given credit for five games he missed as a free agent after being cut by Green Bay before the regular season opener. Fujita had his initial suspension reduced from three games to one, with the league saying that he failed in his duty as a defensive leader to discourage the bounty program run by former defensive coordinator Gregg Williams.

Goodell also suspended Williams indefinitely, while banning Saints head coach Sean Payton for a full season. Saints general manager Mickey Loomis got an half-season ban and Saints assistant head coach Joe Vitt served six games.

While the Saints have said they will not allow the bounty sanctions to be a “built-in excuse” for failure, the club is now 5-8 following a three-game skid that has all but assured New Orleans will miss the playoffs for the first time since 2008.

Tagliabue’s ruling will come after a new round of hearings that for the first time allowed Vilma’s attorneys and the NFL Players Association, which represents the other three punished players, to cross examine key NFL witnesses in the probe. Those witnesses included Williams and former Saints assistant Mike Cerullo, who was fired after the 2009 season and whose email to the league, accusing the Saints of being “a dirty organization,” jump-started the probe.

Other witnesses included Vilma, Vitt, NFL investigators and former Minnesota head coach Brad Childress. Childress had told the NFL in 2010 that one of his players, Jimmy Kennedy, heard from Hargrove that there was a bounty on then-Vikings quarterback Brett Favre in the NFC title game.

Also for the first time, the NFL allowed players' attorneys to review all of the documents the NFL had collected, including some in which people stated that the players never did what they were accused of, the person who spoke with AP said.__PUBLIC__