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## Perry defends removal of 3 before arson hearing

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AUSTIN – Gov. Rick Perry on Thursday defended his removal of three commissioners looking into whether the state used bad science to execute an innocent man, suggesting too much was being made of his move.

On Wednesday, Perry decided to replace three members of the Texas Forensic Science Commission, including its chairman, just two days before it conducted a hearing to examine the case of Cameron Todd Willingham. The new chairman canceled the meeting.

"What's happening is that we're following the normal protocol of the state. Those individuals' terms were up, so we replaced them," Perry said.

But others who have followed the Willingham case accused the governor of working to delay and derail the commission's investigation.

Barry Scheck, co-director of the Innocence Project that has helped free dozens of Texans through the use of DNA evidence, likened the governor's move to Richard Nixon's "Saturday night massacre," when he fired special prosecutor Archibald Cox during the Watergate scandal.

Willingham was executed in 2004 for causing the death of his three small children in a 1991 Corsicana house fire, but numerous experts now say there was no evidence of arson.

The forensic commission, created in 2005, is charged with investigating potential negligence or misconduct with the use of scientific evidence in criminal cases.

Perry said the commission would still follow the law and look into the Willingham case, although he declined to urge them to do so, saying that wasn't his role.

"I think folks are making a lot of this issue when the fact of the matter is I think we're bringing in some people that are very capable," the governor said.

The new chairman named by Perry is Williamson County District Attorney John Bradley, known as one of the toughest law-and-order prosecutors in the state.

"If you've got a whole new investigation going forward, it makes a lot more sense to put the new people in now and let them start the full process rather than having people in for a short period of time and then replace them," Perry said.

Perry recently discounted the findings of a myriad of scientists, who in three separate reviews concluded that Willingham fire investigators relied on old, discredited indicators of arson – "wives' tales," as some called it. They said the fire might have been caused by a faulty space heater or bad wiring.

In an interview last month with *The Dallas Morning News*, Perry said, "I'm familiar with the latter-day supposed experts on the arson side of it," and made quotation marks with his fingers to underscore his skepticism. He said the records he reviewed before allowing the execution showed "clear and compelling, overwhelming evidence that he was in fact the murderer of his children."

On Thursday, the executive director of the National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty said she believes Texas executed an innocent man. But Diann Rust-Tierney said everyone should be concerned if the process is being manipulated to hide the facts.

"Regardless of one's personal views on capital punishment, we can all agree that our commitment to honesty, integrity and government accountability should not be another casualty of this terrible tragedy," she said.