

MEDIA CONTACT:

[Andrea Bitley](#)
[Megan Hawthorne](#)
517-373-8060

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 29, 2017

LANSING – Michigan Attorney General Bill Schuette is reminding Michigan residents to exercise caution in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. Unfortunately whether it is selling a flood damaged vehicle or taking donations meant for disaster relief, scammers choose times of disaster to take advantage of hard working well meaning citizens.

“Hurricane Harvey has inflicted disastrous results on the state of Texas and we are thinking of all the individuals affected by the storm,” said Schuette. “It is important to remember that while storms like this can bring out the best in people, it can also bring out scammers who see a disaster as nothing more than an opportunity to make a quick buck. I encourage Michigan residents to protect themselves from post disaster scams.”

Schuette noted that the most common scams to happen after a storm of this nature are fake charities, and selling flood damaged vehicles.

Charitable Giving Scams

In the aftermath of a natural disaster, many individuals seek to donate to relief efforts and residents who have lost everything in the storm. However, scam artists use disaster tragedies to enrich themselves. These scammers exploit the sympathy of donors—perhaps with a name sounding both compassionate and legitimate or with a heart-wrenching appeal—to steal the donations or get consumers’ sensitive financial information.

Residents can avoid disaster scams and make a positive contribution to relief and rebuilding projects by doing a little research before making a donation. Follow these tips:

- Be cautious of requests for donations by unfamiliar organizations or people.
- Beware of unsolicited contacts and appeals on social media sites. Some leading relief charities now accept donations via cell phone, but unsolicited text messages, like unsolicited telephone and email communications, should be viewed with suspicion and handled with caution.
- Crowdfunding and other types of internet-giving can be tools of tremendous good, but as with any type of giving it can be abused, so proceed with caution when donating online. [A Consumer alert with additional information and advice on crowdfunding is available here.](#)
- Continue to reach out and help, but choose established charitable organizations with a history of helping those in need.
- Before donating, search the [Attorney General's website](#) to see if the organization is registered to solicit in Michigan. (Be aware that some legitimate charities, including the American Red Cross and Salvation Army, do not appear in the Attorney General's database because they are exempt.)

- The [Attorney General's website](#) has additional information and advice on charitable giving. Citizens may call the Attorney General's Charitable Trust Section at 517-373-1152 to check on a specific charity. To check on a police or fire organization, call 800-769-4515, toll-free.

Protect Yourself Before Purchasing a Used Vehicle

When flooding hits, hundreds of vehicles are damaged. Many will end up on the used car market. Vehicles with flood damage from a hurricane can be shipped across the country in a matter of days and appear for sale on the internet or at car lots, without any mention or obvious signs of the damage.

The National Salvage Vehicle Reporting Program, an independent third party standards body for the federal government's comprehensive database on vehicle damage history, reports that thousands of water/flood damaged vehicles have been sold at auction, including some then resold without disclosure that they were flood-damaged.

Water can damage vital parts of a car including airbag sensors, brakes, and electrical systems — and the damage may not show up right away. Weeks or months could pass before evidence of damage is known, putting the purchase past warranty and leaving a driver without a car.

Have the vehicle inspected by an independent, competent automotive technician who has no relation to the seller. Since water damage can be hard to spot, paying an expert mechanic for an inspection is a good idea.

[Check the vehicle history.](#) Get the VIN (vehicle identification number) and trace its history through the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System database for a small fee. The National Motor Vehicle Information System is administered by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Some consumers also choose to trace vehicle history using commercially available reports such as [Experian's Auto Check](#) or [CarFax](#). A vehicle history should tell you if the car has been in a flood region or issued a flood or salvage title. Remember though, these databases do not always have up-to-date or complete information about a vehicle (which is why the independent inspection is critical).

Be on the lookout for vehicles with tell-tale signs of being submerged in water. For example:

- Musty or "over-perfumed" smell or signs of mold or mildew;
- Water stains, mud or residue in the trunk, under the carpet, floor mats, gas and brake pedals, and in hard-to-reach places difficult to clean;
- Title or registration histories indicating the car was in a flood area;
- Car hesitates, runs rough, or shows signs of premature rust or corrosion in places where you wouldn't expect to see rust, such as the upper door hinges, trunk latches, and screws on the console.
- Always physically inspect the vehicle's paper title before you buy. Check to see if it has been branded as "flood," "junk," "salvage," "rebuilt" or another brand indicating the vehicle was severely damaged. But beware; a clean title does not prove the car is undamaged. The title may have been 'laundered' across state lines or altered to conceal the brand.

File a Complaint

Consumers should file complaints against a used motor vehicle dealer with the [Secretary of State, Bureau of Information Security, Regulatory Monitoring Division online](#) or by contacting the Bureau of Information Security, Regulatory Monitoring Division at 888-SOS-MICH (888-767-6424).

Consumers may contact the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division at:

Consumer Protection Division

P.O. Box 30213
Lansing, MI 48909
517-373-1140
Fax: 517-241-3771
Toll free: 877-765-8388
[Online complaint form](#)