

CONSUMER ADVISORY

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By Attorney General Tom Miller

How to Avoid Buying a Salvage, Damaged or Flood Vehicle

Sometimes, shopping for a used vehicle can be a challenge. While there are many good used vehicles offered for sale, there are others that have been wrecked or flood-damaged, with the damage concealed in some way. Many used car sellers are honest about the condition and history of the vehicle. But others may conceal information or simply may not know that a car they offer for sale suffered major damage.

Undisclosed damage history hurts consumers. The retail values of these vehicles are much lower than average. So, consumers may overpay for them. Also, cars that once had major damage can present safety hazards and, especially in the case of flood damage, can result in problems that have yet to surface. The vehicles may require expensive repairs and create other headaches.

So, consumers may want to check car histories before buying and there are companies that offer vehicle history reports. Some “guarantee” to tell you if a used vehicle you're considering buying was previously wrecked. But no service includes information on all wrecked vehicles.

Take these steps to reduce the chances of buying a used vehicle with undisclosed damage:

- Have the vehicle inspected by an independent auto technician and body shop before making an offer on the vehicle. People who work on cars for a living know what to look for. Never make an offer to a seller who won't let you take the vehicle to someone you trust for advice before making an offer!
- Take the vehicle for a test drive. Look for signs of water damage such as a musty smell or a damp trunk. Look around the engine for signs of unusual corrosion.
- Check the vehicle's history online. Look for information showing the vehicle had been titled as salvage, flood, or rebuilt or had been in a wreck. Go first to www.VehicleHistory.gov, which links to services with low-cost information from the NMVTIS database overseen by the U.S. Department of Justice. Then consider also buying reports from companies such as Autocheck or Carfax. But, remember that no history report captures all information, nor is it a substitute for having the vehicle inspected.

If you find out that you unknowingly bought a vehicle with past significant damage, you may file a complaint with our office by calling, toll-free outside of the Des Moines area at: 888-777-4590, or in Des Moines, call 281-5926. Or, file a complaint online by going to www.IowaAttorneyGeneral.gov. You may also mail a complaint letter to us in writing: Consumer Protection Division, 1305 E. Walnut Street, Des Moines, IA 50319.