

Consumer Information from Mid Oregon Credit Union

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Keep an eye out for storm-damaged vehicles

NEW YORK (9/12/11)--Remember those waterlogged vehicles shown on the news during Hurricane Irene's pass through the East Coast? Those same cars and trucks could end up on a dealer lot near you--even if you live nowhere near the areas affected by the storm (*The New York Times* Sept. 1).

Flood-damaged vehicles could appear on lots all over the country, often priced very low but with no disclosure from sellers about storm damage. You might think you've found a great deal but, without a critical eye, you could drive off the lot with vehicle problems waiting to happen.

If you're shopping for a used vehicle, take precautions before you buy:

- *Get the history.* Obtain a vehicle history report through a service like Carfax, which offers reports for \$34.99 each. You also can use the vehicle identification number (VIN) to check out the vehicle's status through the National Insurance Crime Bureau's VINCheck tool.
- *Check for dirt--but also for spotlessness.* Thoroughly check the vehicle for soot, grime, and other signs of water damage. On the flip side, if a vehicle looks unusually clean--particularly under the hood--it should be another red flag that something isn't right.
- *Trust your nose.* Does the car smell musty? Damage from water and sewage can create that odor, which is difficult to mask. Still, sellers may try, so, if you smell strong deodorizer or air freshener, it could be the scent of trouble.
- *Drive it.* Test-drive the car and pay attention to the way it handles and sounds. Listen to the engine and brakes--squeaking or grinding is a bad sign.
- *Get hands-on.* Feel all surfaces for dampness and dirt. Pay close attention to seat firmness, which can be weakened by water damage.
- *Consult a mechanic.* Never buy a used vehicle without having it inspected by a mechanic. With the car on a garage lift, a professional can detect problems that you wouldn't necessarily notice. A mechanic also can run an electrical diagnostic--an important component of an inspection, since water-damaged cars commonly experience problems in this area.

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