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Buyer beware of flood-damaged cars for sale

Aside from a house, buying a new or used vehicle is likely one of the biggest purchases a consumer will make. Being as informed as possible will help buyers make the best and wisest purchase possible. With the heavy rains many parts of the country sustained this spring, there was flood damage to homes and other property, including vehicles. Unfortunately, there are some unscrupulous sellers who simply want to unload these damaged vehicles to unsuspecting buyers.

There are several key things potential buyers need to keep in mind when shopping for a new or used vehicle.

Start your vehicle search by talking to a reputable dealer. These businesses aren't going to risk their reputations. Once you've found a vehicle to your liking, ask the dealer if it has been damaged by floods, and get that answer in writing. If the dealer hesitates or won't commit to a firm 'no,' this can be cause for concern. The same holds true for an individual selling a car.

Be sure to ask the dealer to look at the vehicle's title. You will be able to see what region of the country the vehicle came from, and if it came from a region with significant flooding, check for indications on the title that read "flood" or "salvage." These indicators are required by law in some states.

Not only use your eyes when searching for a vehicle, use your nose as well. It can be very difficult to get rid of the musty smell from a flood-damaged car. This unpleasant smell should be a red flag for potential buyers. If there is a heavy smell of an air freshener, this too can be a sign the seller is trying to cover up the musty smell.

Buyers also should look for signs of moisture in the car. Run your hands along the carpet, especially in places where water could pool. Open the trunk and even pull out the spare tire. Feel the material underneath as this is a place in which water can

collect. Peel back the carpet and look for signs of rust. Also check for rust on door hinges, hood springs, trunk latches, bolts and brackets under the dash. Corrosion is common in flood-damaged cars and continues to eat away at materials long after the car has been dried out. You might even want to use a mirror to check for rust on the springs under the seats, as well as the undercarriage of the car.

Another tell-tale sign of flood damage is mismatched upholstery. If sections of upholstery don't match other parts of the car, this is a good indicator some of it has been replaced. Also be sure to look for water stains. And, if the car is 10 years old but the carpet looks new, ask questions. All of the material inside the car should appear to be about the same age.

Flood water obviously can damage the electrical wiring in a car, so when going on a test drive be sure to test all of the electronics in the vehicle, including headlights, brake lights, backup lights, dashboard lights, blinkers, windshield wipers, emergency flashers, cigarette lighter, ports for electronics and the radio/CD player. Make sure everything is in proper working order.

Once you've found a vehicle you like and think is a good investment, take it to your trusted mechanic for inspection. A good mechanic will know where to look for signs of flood damage that you may not be able to access or know how to examine. The mechanic should take off the wheels and inspect the brakes and wheel components, which can carry visible signs of flood damage. Buying a vehicle is a large investment. While consumers are always looking for a good deal, you want to purchase a safe and reliable mode of transportation, as well as one that is in good condition. If the dealership or seller is making a deal that sounds too good to be true, consumers should probably just walk away.

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