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Flood Damage Database; anti-fraud resource

Insurance industry estimates of Hurricane Katrina and Rita-damaged vehicles range from 200,000 to 700,000. Documenting vehicle damage of this scope is a monumental undertaking and to assist with this, the National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB), a non-profit insurance organization has launched a free online database for the public at www.nicb.org.

A vehicle identification number (VIN) entered in www.nicb.org will potentially reveal if a vehicle has or has not been “affected by Hurricanes Katrina or Rita.” A “hit” is a good reason to investigate further. It does not mean a salvage title has issued, or that the vehicle has been flood damaged; only that the VIN was collected for one of three reasons:

- An insurance claim has been initiated
- A NICB inspector has looked at the vehicle
- The vehicle is in a "holding" area or storage facility for towed cars

“It is crucial that consumers protect themselves by thoroughly investigating a vehicle prior to buying” said Mike Craig, interim director, Vehicle Titles and Registration Div. (VTR) of TxDOT. “The number of damaged vehicles is historic, as is the potential for fraud. Fortunately, information is being gathered quickly using the latest technology by the insurance industry and law enforcement. Public and private groups are cooperating in a united response to prevent future fraud.”

Several for-profit online vehicle information sites are also offering free VIN searches to the public. Because it may be months before hundreds of thousands of vehicle titles will be issued reflecting salvage or flood brands, consumers are once again reminded of the adage “Buyer Beware.” While database research provides valuable instant snapshots, a physical examination is still the best way to avoid buying a flood damaged vehicle. Key signs of water damage are listed on the TxDOT Web site at www.dot.state.tx.us/vtr/flood/flddamg.htm