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Crist: Price Gouging Complaints Increase for Repairs, Cleanup

TALLAHASSEE – With Floridians beginning the rebuilding process in the wake of Hurricane Wilma's assault one week ago, Attorney General Charlie Crist today said his office's Price Gouging Hotline has seen a spike in repair and cleanup related complaints. Crist said Floridians affected by Hurricane Wilma should use extra caution when hiring workers to help clean up the damage caused by the storm. In particular, Crist warned those who are victims of downed trees and roof and window damage to be alert for contractors who offer cleanup services for homes and property.

Crist said his office has received nearly 700 complaints of alleged price gouging related to Hurricane Wilma. Investigators from the Attorney General's Office have mobilized to crack down on price gouging on items that are in high demand following a hurricane, such as food, water, hotels, ice, gasoline, lumber and generators as well as services related to hurricane recovery.

"Our citizens are trying to recover from Hurricane Wilma's devastation, and the last thing they need is to worry that some 'helper' will try to take advantage of them," said Crist. "Most contractors are there to help, but there are con artists seeking to profit at the expense of storm victims. The Attorney General's Office will investigate and prosecute price gougers and peddlers of fraud taking advantage of Floridians in this time of need."

Since Friday, the Attorney General's Price Gouging hotline has received some four dozen complaints related to cleanup efforts following Hurricane Wilma. Consumers may report price gouging by calling the Attorney General's Price Gouging Hotline toll-free at 1-866-9-NO-SCAM or 1-866-966-7226.

Residents are advised to use extra caution when hiring workers to help clean up the damage caused by the storm. Consumers face the risk that services will be offered by unlicensed individuals, that cleanup services will be offered at unconscionably high prices, or that so-called "contractors" will accept down payments but will not do the work at all.

Crist has provided a series of guidelines for consumers to protect themselves from unscrupulous contractors, including:

- Require home repair contractors to obtain all necessary government licenses and permits, rather than leaving that burden on the consumer.
- Make sure contractors have proper occupational licenses as required by state law.
- Work only with reputable, established businesses. Avoid "contractors" who knock on your door offering to fix your roof or windows. Try to obtain more than one estimate for the repair work.
- Before signing a contract, check the payment terms and other provisions carefully.

Don't pay a contractor in advance.

- Do not pay cash to home repair contractors or tree removal services.

Last week, the Attorney General's Office sued the Wellesley Inn and Suites in Ft. Myers for more than doubling its room rate as Wilma affected the state. Already this year the Attorney General's Office received more than 4,300 complaints related to price gouging associated with earlier Hurricanes Dennis, Katrina and Rita, and has filed two lawsuits against Tallahassee gas stations for alleged price gouging during Katrina. In addition, the office has subpoenaed four oil companies for records associated with gas prices during Dennis and Katrina.

During last year's record-setting hurricane season, Crist's office received 8,911 complaints through its price gouging hotline. Following last year's hurricanes, the office initiated 58 formal investigations and filed 13 price gouging lawsuits against hotels, generator businesses, tree removal companies and other businesses.

In two incidents in the wake of Hurricane Charley last year, a tree removal company attempted to charge almost nine times the going rate in order to remove trees from the yards of Orange County homeowners. The Attorney General's Office also worked with local law enforcement to arrest an out-of-state resident for wrongfully soliciting to do roofing repairs without a valid Florida contractor's license.

To date the Attorney General's Office has recovered more than \$939,000 in restitution for Florida consumers from settlements and other resolutions stemming from the 2004 hurricane season. Other investigations and settlement negotiations are ongoing. Consumers may report price gouging by calling the Attorney General's Price Gouging Hotline toll-free at 1-866-9-NO-SCAM or 1-866-966-7226.