FLORIDA CONSUMER
NEWSLETTER
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COMMISSIONER WILTON SIMPSON, FLORIDA FOREST SERVICE HIGHLIGHT CURRENT WILDFIRE CONDITIONS AND URGE RESIDENTS TO BE WILDFIRE READY

Florida's peak wildfire season usually encompasses April, May, and June, and the National Interagency Fire Center has predicted an "above normal significant wildfire potential" across the state this year.

"Florida is experiencing widespread drought conditions like we have not seen in years, and forecasts show the next few months could be extremely active for wildfires," said Commissioner Simpson. "We need all Floridians to do their part now by following local burn restrictions, staying alert to weather conditions when burning, and preparing their homes and yards to be wildfire ready. Remember, every fire prevented is one less fire we must respond to, and that will help ensure the safety of our firefighters and our communities."

The Florida Forest Service is encouraging the public to visit BeWildfireReadyFL.com to learn how to protect lives, homes, and communities. Smoke from wildfires has the potential to cause negative physical health impacts even though the fires might be hundreds of miles away. Take extra precautions if you or someone in your family has cardiac or respiratory conditions. The Florida Department of Environmental Protection has a great website for checking air quality: Air Quality Today | Florida Department of Environmental Protection

"Thanks to year-round training, investment in heavy equipment and aviation resources, and aggressive wildfire mitigation efforts across our state, the Florida Forest Service and our local and federal partners are as prepared for an active peak wildfire season as possible," said Rick Dolan, Director of the Florida Forest Service. "I'm asking everyone to pay attention to the weather, especially wind, relative humidity, and days since rain, when considering burning. Peak wildfire season is here, and we need to be wildfire ready."

One of the best available tools the Florida Forest Service uses to fight potentially devastating wildfires is prescribed burning. Florida leads the nation in the use of prescribed fire, and approximately 2 million acres of public and private land in Florida are treated with prescribed fire each year. The Florida Forest Service has treated more than 580,000 acres of state forests with prescribed fire since the beginning of 2023 under Commissioner Simpson's leadership.

To view current wildfire conditions and activity, visit FDACS.gov/CurrentWildfires.

2026 VARSITY NATIONAL LIFESMARTS CHAMPIONSHIP HELD IN ORLANDO

LifeSmarts is the nation's premier consumer education program and competition for middle and high school students that helps them learn to be smart consumers. For over 30 years, LifeSmarts has provided educators with free resources to teach students about fundamental consumer topics and enhance critical thinking. Learning focuses on five key topic areas: consumer rights and responsibilities, the environment, health and safety, personal finance, and technology. The goal of LifeSmarts is to create consumer savvy young people who will be well equipped for adult life in today's complex, global marketplace.

Educational resources include lessons, team activities, presentations, videos, content vocabulary, question-of-the-day calendars, and much more. LifeSmarts stays current — expanding its content, competitions, and consumer knowledge. LifeSmarts complements the curriculum already in place in middle school and high school, and can be used as an activity for classes, groups, clubs, and community organizations. LifeSmarts also aligns with national education standards.

Competition includes online and live competitions. Students who participate in the program begin competition online. The highest scoring teams are invited to in-person live state championships. Statewide competitions are locally coordinated by state partnering organizations and agencies. In states without a state coordinator, NCL hosts a virtual state championship. State winners and qualifying Wild Card teams are invited to the National LifeSmarts Championship held in a different city every April.

Last month, winners of the State Varsity LifeSmarts Championships were invited to represent their state and compete in the National LifeSmarts Championship held in Orlando. The Florida team, pictured here, placed fourth in the nation.

Carly Gray: Carly is an 18-year-old senior at Tate High School & sophomore at University of West Florida. She has been in the Northview 4-H Club for nine years and is a member of multiple 4-H competition teams. This was her second time competing at a LifeSmarts National contest.

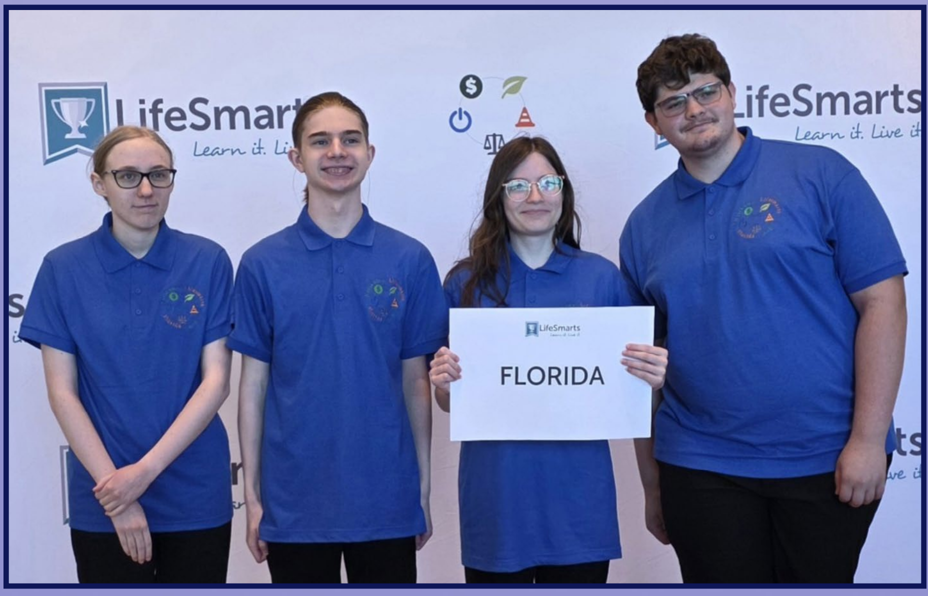
Lydia Bowman: Lydia is an 18-year-old homeschool student graduating in May of this year. She has been in the Northview 4-H club since fourth grade, making this her ninth year of 4-H.

Braden Poole: Braden is also 18 and is a 2026 graduate of Hillcrest Private Academy. He has been involved with the Northview 4-H club for four years. Braden says 4-H and LifeSmarts has both had a positive impact on his life, preparing him for the future.

Jaden Zofcin: Jaden is a 17-year-old junior at Pace High School. He is an active member of the Northview 4-H Club and serves as the Senior Patrol Leader for Troop 400 in Scouts BSA.

Linda Crews: Linda has been a LifeSmarts coach for seven years. This is her second varsity team to compete nationally and will be accompanying her junior varsity team in May for the third year in a row. She has been a 4-H volunteer for 12 years in Escambia County.

Congratulations to the team!



SENIOR FRAUD AWARENESS DAY IS MAY 15

Defrauding the older adults deprives them of their resources and eventually their independence, and older adults with disabilities may be more vulnerable as they may have to rely on others for assistance. How can you increase your awareness to avoid this type of exploitation?

In 2018, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution designating May 15 as National Senior Fraud Awareness Day to combat the rising tide of scams targeting older Americans. Supported by the Senate Aging Committee, the initiative aimed to raise awareness, improve prevention, and protect seniors from scams. The resolution also recognized that senior fraud is underreported due to the perceived shame of being scammed.

Signs of Elder Financial Abuse

Watch out for these red flags which are signs of financial abuse:

- Uncharacteristic activity in accounts, especially large, frequent or unexplained withdrawals.
- ATM withdrawals when the person has never used a debit or ATM card.
- Withdrawals or transfers from bank accounts the person cannot explain.
- Unexpected unpaid bills or notices of non-sufficient funds.
- Closing accounts without regard to penalties.
- Dubious signatures on checks or obvious forgery.
- Confusion and fear when discussing missing funds.
- Changes in behavior, such as anxiety, anger or fearfulness.
- Refusal to make eye contact, shame or reluctance to talk about the problem.
- Missing checks or no register notes in checkbook.
- A caretaker or relative who suddenly begins conducting financial transactions on behalf of an older person without proper documentation.
- Sudden isolation from family and friends.
- Loss of property.

What should you do if you suspect financial abuse?

- Talk to the older adult to try to determine precisely what is happening.
- Report any unauthorized transactions to the financial institution involved immediately.
- Contact the local adult protective services for assistance and other resources.
- Report all instances of elder financial abuse or fraud to your local police.

Sources

FBI Philadelphia Recognizes National Senior Fraud Awareness Day — FBI
National Senior Fraud Awareness Day | IdentityForce®
National Senior Fraud Awareness Day - Country Bank- Made To Make A Difference

RESOURCES FOR HURRICANE PREP

Living in Florida has its advantages but severe weather is not among those. Residents quickly learn to be prepared for severe weather, from winter freezes, to tornados, to hurricanes. As hurricane season begins June 1, it is an opportune time to make advance preparations.

Special Needs
Do you or anyone in your family have special needs or accommodation, such as a physical disability, medical needs, etc.? Now is the time to plan for care during a storm. Register with the Florida Special Needs Registry to receive important information from local emergency management officials about evacuation and sheltering options available. This registry allows local personnel to plan should you need electricity to operate medical equipment, transportation to evacuate, or help in accessing medication.

Create a plan for yourself or your family member(s) with special needs now. Having a plan in place will make an emergency less stressful and allow everyone to better respond to the situation. Visit Make A Plan | Florida Disaster to assess the needs and considerations in creating a plan for preparedness.

Stay Informed
Accessing detailed information about community hazards and knowing what resources are available to you is crucial during a severe weather event. This information will be provided by your local emergency management agency. Also, make sure you sign up for emergency weather alerts in your area. A subscription could save your life!

Florida Public Radio Network stations broadcast public safety and emergency messaging as needed throughout the state as partner stations report on local emergencies. Visit Florida Public Radio Emergency Network (FPREN) to download their app to your phone or get updates on your computer. For real-time public safety alerts and advisories for the entire state, download the Futuri Alerts app to your phone.

If you need to evacuate or travel during an emergency, you'll need to know what roadways are safe and free of hazards. Florida Highway Patrol allows you to view live traffic crash and roadway condition reports.

Be sure to visit FDACS Storm Preparation for more information on getting ready for severe weather.

TICKET AND TOLL SCAMS

Have you recently gotten a text saying you did not pay for an outstanding traffic ticket yet you have no memory of it? Be wary of such a text because it is probably a scam. Read on for advice on how not to fall for such texts.

The Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (FLHSMV) is warning drivers about a recent text message scam targeting Floridians. The scam claims the recipient has an unpaid traffic ticket and threatens to suspend their driver license and vehicle registration if payment is not made immediately through a fraudulent link. Various reports have been received throughout the state, therefore the extent of the scam is not known. If you receive a similar text message, remember that FLHSMV will never contact you via text to demand payment or threaten suspension or arrest. Do not click any links or share personal or financial information. FLHSMV asks that you immediately report any such text message to local law enforcement and the Federal Trade Commission.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has reported on a similar scam, after having received consumer complaints about imposters sending fraudulent text messages claiming to be from one of several legitimate toll payment companies. The scam texts states that the recipient has an unpaid toll or owes a balance on their account, which will be suspended if immediate payment is not made.
The sender's number may be spoofed to look like it's from a toll company.
The scam text will likely include a link and ask you to click the link to pay immediately or verify your information. The link appears to be an official website but is actually a phishing site designed to fool you.
Scam messages often ask you to pay through non-standard methods such as gift cards or wire transfers, which is almost always a dead giveaway that it's an imposter scam. Other clues:

- The sender's number may be an international number.
- There may be other phone numbers included as recipients.

Scam messages may also use generic greetings such as "Dear Customer" or "E-ZPass user," rather than addressing you by name. E-ZPass typically uses the name on the account in a greeting.

Toll operators typically don't use text messages to collect on overdue accounts, and do not use threatening language to rush customers into action.

What you should do if you receive one of these messages:

- **Do Not Engage with the Texter.** Do not reply to the message, including pushing a button or responding "Y" or "N."
- **Do Not Click** any links embedded in the text.
- **Find Out if the Text Message Is Legitimate.** Call a customer service number or log into your account to check for any valid violations or unpaid tolls. If your account is in order, report the scam text to your toll company.
    - If the text claims to be from a toll company operating in a different state, independently find a customer service phone number online and call before sending any money or providing personal information.
- **Block the Number.** Consider blocking the sender's number to prevent future scam attempts.
- **Report the Scam to Law Enforcement.** If you suspect a text message is a scam, report it to the Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) at www.ic3.gov.
- **Do Not Share Your Info.** Never share personally identifiable information or financial information in response to unsolicited or suspicious messages.
- **Don't Be Bullied.** Any request that you receive urging immediate action can lead to a rushed response that may be unwise.
- **File a Complaint with the FCC.** Your information helps to inform FCC enforcement and policy efforts, and helps us raise public awareness of these scams.

LOOKING FOR DEBT RELIEF? HERE'S HOW TO AVOID A SCAM

From the Federal Trade Commission

If you're dealing with a lot of debt, you might be looking for help. Some companies offer a range of free and paid services, like budget counseling and debt management classes. But others are dishonest and will take your money for the promise of getting rid of your debt — just to leave you even worse off. So, how can you avoid scams while you're trying to pay off your debt?

When it comes to debt relief services, only scammers will tell you to pay them upfront before they settle any of your debts or enter you into a debt management plan. And anyone that guarantees to settle all your debts or get you fast loan forgiveness is a scammer. So if you get an unexpected call or text offering to settle your debts fast and asking you to share personal or financial information, that's a sure sign of a scam. Don't respond or share any information.

If you're in debt, there are ways to get real help. Here are some things to know:

- Reputable credit counseling organizations should send you free information about their services before you say anything about your situation. Look for an organization that will do a thorough review of your finances and won't charge in advance for help it hasn't given yet.
- Your local credit union, university, community college, or military personal financial manager might offer low-cost credit counseling programs. Before you sign up, find out how much they'll charge.
- Consumer.gov has information about steps to take yourself (like making a budget) to help you get out of debt, get help when you're in debt, and what to know if you're getting calls from debt collectors.

If you spot a debt relief scam, tell the FTC at ReportFraud.ftc.gov.

ABOUT THE FDACS DIVISION OF CONSUMER SERVICES

FDACS is Florida's state consumer protection agency responsible for regulating charities and handling consumer complaints. FDACS handles more than 400,000 consumer complaints and inquiries, oversees more than 500,000 regulated devices, entities, and products like gas pumps and grocery scales, performs over 61,000 lab analyses on products like gasoline and brake fluid, performs nearly 9,000 fair ride inspections, and returned over $2.8 million to consumers through mediations with businesses.

The Division of Food Safety monitors food from the point of manufacturing and distribution through wholesale and retail sales to ensure the public of safe, wholesome and properly represented food products.
CLICK THE ICON ABOVE TO SEE THE LATEST RECALLS, MARKET WITHDRAWALS, & SAFETY ALERTS.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission provides consumer product recall information as part of the agency's mission to protect consumers and families from hazardous products.
CLICK THE ICON ABOVE TO SEE THE LATEST RECALLS, MARKET WITHDRAWALS, & SAFETY ALERTS.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is the state's clearinghouse for consumer complaints, protection and information. Consumers who would like information about filing a complaint against a business or who believe fraud has taken place can visit us online at FloridaConsumerHelp.com or contact the department's consumer protection and information hotline by calling 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) or 1-800-FL-AYUDA (352-9832) for Spanish speakers.