



FLORIDA CONSUMER NEWSLETTER

May 2024

A publication of the Florida Department of
Agriculture and Consumer Services

BE WILDFIRE READY

Florida Commissioner of Agriculture Wilton Simpson and the Florida Forest Service recently provided information highlighting Florida's current wildfire conditions and urging residents to be wildfire ready. Historically, Florida's year-round wildfire season peaks in April, May, and June, and the National Interagency Fire Center has [predicted](#) a relatively normal wildfire potential for Florida this season. Since January, over 500 wildfires have burned more than 8,800 acres in Florida. Last year, a total of 2,439 wildfires burned more than 52,161 acres across the state. The Florida Forest Service is encouraging the public to "Be Wildfire Ready" – know Florida's outdoor burning laws, prepare your yard, prepare your home, and prepare an emergency supply kit. As Florida's population increases, so does the wildland urban interface – the zone where homes and businesses are near forests or wooded areas that are both fire-dependent and fire-prone. While Florida is the lightning capital of the U.S., the leading cause of wildfires in the state is people.

There are many tools that can help reduce the chances of a catastrophic wildfire, including creating defensible space, safely burning yard waste, utilizing prescribed burning, and reporting suspicious arson activity. To learn how to protect your life, home, and community, visit [BeWildfireReadyFL.com](https://www.BeWildfireReadyFL.com). To view current wildfire conditions and activity, visit [FDACS.gov/CurrentWildfires](https://www.FDACS.gov/CurrentWildfires).

The Florida Forest Service, a division of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, manages more than 1 million acres of state forests and provides forest management assistance on more than 17 million acres of private and community forests. The Florida Forest Service is also responsible for protecting homes, forestland, and natural resources from the devastating effects of wildfire.

- [Current U.S. Drought Monitor Map for Florida](#)
- [Current Keetch-Byram Drought Index](#)

For more information about [Commissioner Simpson](#) and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, visit [FDACS.gov](https://www.FDACS.gov).

www.FloridaConsumerHelp.com

1-800-HELP-FLA(435-7352) • Mon-Fri, 8a.m. – 5p.m., EST • 1-800-FL-AYUDA(352-9832)

TOLL VIOLATION SCAM

Be on the lookout for fake texts claiming you owe money for unpaid tolls.

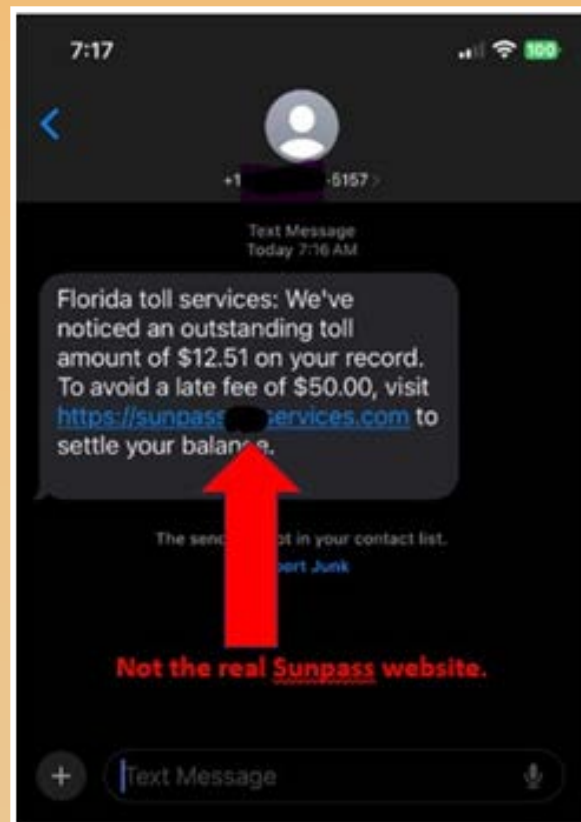
Since early-March 2024, the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) has received over 2,000 complaints reporting smishing texts representing road toll collection service from at least three states. IC3 complaint information indicates the scam may be moving from state-to-state, and similar texts have been received by Florida residents.

The texts contain almost identical language. The “outstanding toll amount” is similar among the complaints reported to the IC3. However, the link provided within the text is created to impersonate the state’s toll service name, and phone numbers appear to change between states.

In Florida, a photo is taken of a vehicle’s license plate when no SunPass or any other Florida compatible transponder is detected as it travels under the tolling equipment. A Toll Enforcement Invoice is then mailed to the registered owner of the vehicle for the toll(s) incurred over a 30-day period, plus a \$2.50 administrative charge. Email is used by SunPass to communicate with customers, including SunPass Account Statements and other account related matters. However, SunPass does not send official Toll Enforcement Invoices through email or text. Official Toll Invoices are sent only through U.S. Mail, and the only official website to make a payment online is SunPass.com.

If you receive one of these smishing texts, the following is suggested:

1. Verify claims, numbers, and websites by independent means.
2. Check to see if you owe past tolls at www.SunPass.com (www.TollByPlate.com will also route customers to www.SunPass.com). You can also contact the SunPass Customer Service Center at 1-888-TOLL-FLA (1-888-865-5352).
3. If you clicked any link or provided your information, take efforts to secure your personal information and financial accounts. Dispute any unfamiliar charges.
4. File a complaint with the IC3, www.ic3.gov, and be sure to include:
 - a. The phone number from where the text originated.
 - b. The website listed within the text.
5. Delete any smishing texts received.



Smishing: a social engineering attack using fake text messages to trick people into downloading malware, sharing sensitive information, or sending to cybercriminals.

PROTECTING PERSONAL INFORMATION

Companies collect a certain amount of personal information about you when you do business with them. Whether it is an online retailer, a health and wellness website, or a gaming app, businesses need some information to provide their services. After all, how can a food delivery service deliver your order if you don't provide your address? How can a mobile payment service facilitate your payment without your bank account number? It's when companies collect more of your personal data than they need and sell it to other businesses for advertising purposes or fail to properly secure it that problems can occur.

All this information can help companies provide better services and target marketing to your needs; however, the more companies that have your personal information, the greater your risk for falling victim to a scammer or a data breach. Scammers can use your personally identifying information or your web search history to engineer scams that specifically target you and increase their chances of successfully manipulating you to click a sketchy link or provide more information than you should.

If you are concerned about how websites and apps use your personal information, then here are some things the Federal Trade Commission says you should consider:

- 1. Compare privacy protections.** Compare the privacy protections of different websites and apps that offer similar services. Look for a privacy notice that explains in simple terms what health information they collect from you, and how they use and share your information. If the website or app shares your information, does it say why? Does it limit what others can do with it?
- 2. Review website notices.** If you visit a website and see a notice about how the website uses cookies, review the options. They may let you choose to allow only cookies that are necessary or to allow cookies for advertising and other purposes. Choose the option that best suits you.
- 3. Customize the information you share.** Your browser's privacy settings let you customize the information websites collect about you. For example, you can choose to block your location or personalized advertising or block websites from seeing your browsing history. For details, see [How Websites and Apps Collect and Use Your Information](#).

The Federal Trade Commission uses reports of fraud to investigate and bring cases against fraud, scams, and bad business practices. If you have been the victim of a scam or suspect fraud, file a report at reportfraud.ftc.gov.



HELPING A SCAM VICTIM

Sharing a scam experience with someone you know takes courage. If someone trusts you enough to share their scam story, especially if the scammer is still in touch with them, here's some advice to help guide you.

- **Lead with empathy.** Respond with kindness and concern instead of criticizing or expressing disappointment. Scams can happen to anyone. Keep lines of communication open with a kind, concerned response.
- **Let them tell their story.** Talking about a scam experience helps you both understand what happened. And talking about the scam also helps both of you spot it in the future.
- **Validate their story.** The only person at fault here is the scammer — not your friend or family member. It's a scammer's job to steal money or information, and they'll target anyone. Ask them not to blame themselves and, instead, blame the scammer.
- **Ask what we can do next together.** See if their personal information was involved, too, so identity theft might be a concern. And see if they might want to report the scam. Their story can help protect friends, family, their community, and themselves, as well as helping law enforcement agencies like the FTC fight that scam.

Want more help for your friend or family member? Here are some resources:

- To report a scam, go to [ReportFraud.ftc.gov](https://www.ftc.gov/identity-theft).
- Find out more about other [next steps](#) to take after paying a scammer.
- If identity theft is a concern, help them start their recovery at [IdentityTheft.gov](https://www.ftc.gov/identity-theft).

If scammers find the right buttons to push at the wrong time — like when we're distracted or stressed — any of us might just pay them or share information. In addition to financial loss and the negative impacts of identity theft, scam victims may experience deep psychological trauma manifesting in feelings of shame, isolation, lowered self-esteem, and paranoia. It is important to recognize the psychological toll a scam can take on a victim and assure them that they are not alone and that help is available.



NATIONAL MOVING MONTH

May is National Moving Month and begins the busiest moving season of the year. Whether you are moving across town or across the state, it is important to have a plan and to protect yourself and your belongings.

Florida law requires intrastate moving companies and moving brokers to be registered with FDACS prior to conducting business. Under Florida law, professional movers must do the following:

- Provide a written estimate covering the total cost of the move.
- Provide a written contract before performing any services.
- Disclose limitation of liability in writing at the time the estimate or contract for services is rendered.
- Accept a minimum of two of the following three forms of payment:
 - o Cash, cashier's check, money order, traveler's check
 - o Valid personal check
 - o Valid credit card

Other moving tips include:

- **Plan Ahead When Possible** – Have at least three companies provide estimates with an on-site visit. Avoid companies that are only willing to do an estimate over the phone or internet.
- **Do Your Homework**– Research whether the company is registered by using the [Business Search](#) tool at [FloridaConsumerHelp.com](#) or by calling 1-800-HELP-FLA or 1-800-FL-AYUDA en Español.
- **Read Before You Sign** – Remember, the contract and estimate must be signed and dated by both parties; your signature indicates that you acknowledge and accept its terms. Read the entire contract and estimate thoroughly, ask questions, and do not sign it if you have doubts about anything.
- **Be Aware of Scams** - Scams can occur whether you are dealing directly with a moving company or using a broker. One such scam occurs when a moving company quotes a low price in order to secure your business, then increases the cost substantially after loading your household goods onto the truck. Keep a copy of your contract with you during the move to be able to show law enforcement if necessary.
- **Make complaints in writing** - Consumers who are not satisfied should make the mover aware of their claim, in writing, as quickly as possible. If the company does not handle your claim satisfactorily, you may also file a complaint with the Division of Consumer Services. To file a complaint, visit [FloridaConsumerHelp.com](#) or call 1-800-HELP-FLA (435-7352) or 1-800-FL-AYUDA (352- 9832) en Español.

Visit [Moving Within Florida](#) for more information.

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 200,000 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 over 10,000 fair ride inspections, and returned over \$7.8 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.

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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](https://www.floridacconsumerhelp.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.