



FLORIDA CONSUMER NEWSLETTER

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FUEL THEFT RESULTS IN FELONY ARREST

In July 2023, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services announced the Office of Agricultural Law Enforcement (OALE) arrested a suspect involved in organized fuel theft activities, connecting him to a series of eight fuel theft cases across central Florida. [Harold Blanco](#) was taken into custody after a joint operation by the OALE and Osceola County Sheriff's Office.

"I am proud of the exceptional teamwork displayed by the Office of Agricultural Law Enforcement and the Osceola County Sheriff's Office in apprehending this suspect, who is linked to a spree of retail fuel thefts across central Florida," said Commissioner of Agriculture Wilton Simpson. "We will continue to work collaboratively with our law enforcement partners and fuel retailers to combat these organized criminal activities that hurt Florida's consumers and businesses."

The OALE's investigation began when a RaceTrac fuel station located in Kissimmee, Florida, reported significant losses due to fuel theft. Following extensive surveillance and analysis, Harold Blanco was identified as a probable suspect involved in these illicit activities. OALE investigators were then alerted to Blanco's presence at the same RaceTrac fuel station. Through electronic surveillance, Blanco was observed tampering with the fuel pulser dispenser to steal fuel. Upon attempting to initiate contact, Blanco fled in his vehicle. After a brief chase, Harold Blanco was apprehended.

As a result of this arrest, Blanco faces more than 30 criminal charges, including multiple felony charges, from both the OALE and OCSO. The charges include obtaining fuel fraudulently (F.S. 316.80(2), Felony 2), unauthorized access to an electronic device (F.S. 815.06(3)(b)(2), Felony 2), unlawful conveyance of fuel (F.S. 316.80(1), Felony 3), criminal mischief (interruption or impairment to a business) (F.S. 806.13(1)(b)(3), Felony 3), and organized scheme to defraud (F.S. 817.034 (4)(a)(3), Felony 3).

To help combat rampant retail fuel theft across Florida, Commissioner Simpson also worked with the Florida Legislature this year to create criminal penalties for the possession, installation, use, or aiding in the use of contaminant devices—such as fuel dispenser pulsers—inserted into retail fuel dispensers to alter the standard operation or impede standard functionality. In addition, Florida law was changed to create criminal penalties for possessing or using an auxiliary fuel tank to commit retail fuel theft. These new changes went into effect July 1, 2023.

The Office of Agricultural Law Enforcement conducts criminal investigations relating to any matter over which the department has jurisdiction, protects consumers from unfair and deceptive trade practices, protects Florida's agriculture industry from theft and other crimes, and safeguards the integrity of Florida's food and other consumer products. In support of its mission, the Office of Agricultural Law Enforcement operates more than 20 agricultural interdiction stations around the state. Officers conduct vehicle inspections 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to protect Florida's food supply and prevent the introduction and spread of agricultural pests and diseases.

www.FloridaConsumerHelp.com

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

SWEEPSTAKES DECEPTION



It's illegal for a company to tell someone to pay to enter a sweepstakes contest, or that buying something increases their odds of winning. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) recently took action against a well-known sweepstakes operator for misleading consumers about sweepstakes entries and deceiving people for decades.

The [FTC alleged](#) that Publishers Clearing House (PCH) used manipulative language and designs on its website and in its email marketing that tricked consumers, including many older adults, into believing they had to buy products on the PCH website to enter a sweepstakes or improve their chances of winning. Customers who did buy something on PCH.com were in for a few surprises that didn't necessarily involve someone arriving at their door with a giant check and a TV crew.

In their complaint against PCH, the FTC charged the following:

- PCH used a deceptive cycle of emails and webpages that forced consumers through pages of advertisements and sales pitches before they could actually enter the sweepstakes.
- PCH failed to disclose the true price of goods by hiding shipping and handling fees that added an average of 40% to customers' orders.
- PCH's claims about "risk free" purchases were deceptive. Customers were not informed they would have to pay the shipping costs to return merchandise.
- PCH included misleading statements in its Privacy Policy that failed to disclose it share consumer data with other companies to target consumers with third-party ads.

As part of a settlement of the charges that it violated the FTC Act and CAN-SPAN Act, PCH agreed to pay \$18.5 million to the FTC to be used for customer refunds and to make [key changes](#) to its email and internet operations.

In Florida, game promotions or sweepstakes are also regulated by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS). Game promotions offering prizes totaling more than \$5,000 must file with FDACS seven days prior to commencement of the game promotion. Even game promotions based in other states must be filed if they are conducted in Florida and/or are open to Florida residents and have prizes valued at more than \$5,000.

In addition, a surety bond or statement of trust is required from the operator unless they have conducted game promotions in Florida for at least five consecutive years and they have had no civil, criminal or administrative actions instituted against them for a violation of Section [849.094](#), Florida Statutes (F.S.), during that five-year period. This protects consumers who participate by ensuring compensation if the game operator is unable to award prizes offered in the promotion.

If you're considering participating in a sweepstakes contest, here's what to know:

- Real sweepstakes are free and by chance. It's illegal to ask you to pay or buy something to enter.
- If you sign up for a contest, the promoters might sell your information to advertisers. If they do, you're likely to see targeted ads online and get more junk mail, telemarketing calls, and spam email.
- Scammers try to trick you into believing you won a prize. Never share your financial information or pay fees, taxes, or customs duties to get a prize.
- You can verify that a game promotion is properly registered in Florida by calling the FDACS Consumer Assistance Center at 1-800-435-7352 (English) or 1-800-352-9832 (Spanish), Monday through Friday between 8:00 am and 5:00 pm, Eastern Time.

Learn more about recognizing prize and sweepstakes scams by visiting [Game Promotions/Sweepstakes](#) and [Fake Prize, Sweepstakes, and Lottery Scams](#). If you have been a victim of a sweepstakes scam in Florida, visit [Florida-ConsumerHelp.com](#) and [file a complaint](#).

OPERATION STOP SCAM CALLS

A robocall trying to sell you something is illegal unless the company trying to sell you something got written permission, directly from you, to call you that way. Under Federal Trade Commission (FTC) rules, some robocalls don't require your permission:

- **Messages that are purely informational.** Robocalls about your flight being canceled, reminding you about an appointment, or letting you know about a delayed school opening fall into this category, as long as the caller doesn't also try to sell you something.
- **Debt collection calls.** A business contacting you to collect a debt can use robocalls to reach you. But robocalls that try to sell you services to lower your debt are illegal and are almost certainly scams.
- **Political calls.**
- **Calls from some health care providers.** This includes a robocall from a pharmacy reminding you to refill a prescription.
- **Messages from charities.** Charities can make these calls to you themselves. But if a charity hires someone to make robocalls on its behalf, unless you are a prior donor or member of the charity, the robocall is illegal. They also must include an automated option to let you stop future calls.



In July 2023, the FTC and more than 100 federal and state law enforcement partners nationwide, including the attorneys general from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, announced a new crackdown on illegal telemarketing calls involving more than 180 actions targeting operations responsible for billions of calls to U.S. consumers.

Operation Stop Scam Calls is part of the ongoing battle against illegal telemarketing, including the universally reviled robocalls. In addition to targeting telemarketers, the initiative also acted against lead generators and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) service providers. Lead generators often deceptively collect and provide consumers' telephone numbers to robocallers and others, falsely representing that these consumers have consented to receive calls, and VoIP service providers, many of whom have made it easy and cheap for scammers to make robocalls, which often originate overseas.

The enforcement and legal actions taken by the FTC and their federal and state partners have made it clear that third-party lead generation for robocalls is illegal under the Telemarketing Sales Rule (TSR) and that the FTC and its partners are committed to stopping illegal calls by targeting anyone in the telemarketing ecosystem that assists and facilitates these calls, including VoIP service providers.

What should consumers do?

- **Know your rights.** A robocall trying to sell you something is illegal unless the company has your written permission to call you that way.
- **Spot the scams that use illegal robocalls.** Many illegal robocalls lead to scams. They might try to convince you the call is from the government, tech support, or your auto warranty company, but it's not. It's a scam. Listen to some [examples of robocall scams](#).
- **Hang up on phone scams.** Some scammers will call you and say you won a prize but have to pay to get it. (Don't. It's a scam.) Or the scammer may say that you'll be arrested for money you owe and that you have to pay immediately. (That's also a scam.) Hang up or delete the voicemail. Don't press any number or call back.
- **Report scams and illegal robocalls.** Reporting helps law enforcement and investigators stop scams and illegal robocalls. Report scams at [ReportFraud.ftc.gov](https://www.ftc.gov/whats-new/2023/07/report-fraud) and report illegal robocalls at [DoNotCall.gov](https://www.donotcall.gov/).

For more advice on how to stop unwanted calls, check out [ftc.gov/calls](https://www.ftc.gov/calls).

AVOIDING SCAMS - TIPS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

College students are often targeted by financial scammers. In fact, a Better Business Bureau study found students who fell victim to a scam had a 42 percent chance of losing money, compared with just 28 percent of nonstudents. While fraudsters may view you as a vulnerable target, educating yourself about [common fraud tactics](#) and taking a few safety precautions may allow you to protect yourself against financial scams.

Common scams targeting college students include check-cashing scams, payment app scams, bogus credit card offers, fake apartment rentals, and identity theft related to financial aid applications. Although the risk of falling victim to a financial scam may feel unnerving, there are steps you can take to protect yourself and your bank account. Start with these tips:

Don't cash another person's check. Never agree to cash a check on behalf of someone else — especially someone you don't know. There is no legitimate reason that a stranger would pay you to deposit their check, especially when check cashing services exist. The funds from a check are often made available to you before they are collected. If the check is returned NSF or fictitious, you will be responsible for returning the funds to the bank.

Remain skeptical. Whether someone offers you money for a simple task or you've found an available apartment that's going for significantly below market rates, take a moment to ask yourself whether the scenario adds up. If your common sense tells you that it's too good to be true, it probably is.

Safeguard your personal identifying information (PII). If a sudden opportunity requires personal information such as your name and address, phone number, Social Security number, passport information, bank information, your payment app username, or even college ID information, consider it a red flag signaling that you may be dealing with a scammer. Don't share your bank account information with others — online or in person.

Change your password and PIN occasionally. Make sure that your computer, cellphone, and any other devices are password-protected and consider using a password manager to help keep track of your accounts and passwords. Consider using multi-factor authentication whenever possible.

Safeguard important documents. Be sure to store any physical copies of important documents in a safe place, such as a fireproof and waterproof box or safe, a bank safe deposit box, or with a trusted friend or relative. When discarding documents that include your PII, be sure to destroy them or render them unreadable.

Monitor your financial accounts closely. Look for large changes in your balance or other unusual activity that might be a sign of fraud. Sign up for financial alerts from your bank or credit card issuer, which will notify you instantly anytime a large transaction occurs. Check your credit report every year to keep an eye out for new accounts in your name or anything else that appears irregular.

If you believe you've been approached by a financial fraudster, report the incident to the authorities. In addition to contacting the Federal Trade Commission, you should also contact the local police, your bank, and your university about the potential scam so that they can alert other students. Be prepared to share detailed information about how the incident occurred.



GOOGLE SAFELY



Search



Google is the most popular search engine in the western world and the most visited website on earth. As a matter of fact, if you want to know more about “Google,” then just google it. Google is so synonymous with searching for and retrieving information that it has become an action verb.

Knowing the popularity of Google, advertising and marketing companies produce content they know will match with common searches, increasing the chances that their ad will pop up in your search results. Unfortunately, scammers can do the same thing. They can use their knowledge of commonly searched phrases to present links to websites that may trick you into falling for a scam.

Here are five of the most common, and seemingly safe, Google searches that scammers may try to exploit.

“Free credit report”: Monitoring your credit report is a great way to ensure your identity has not been compromised, and everyone is entitled to review their credit report for free at least once a year. Googling “free credit report” may take you to a fake credit report site, where you will be encouraged to share your personal identifying information (PII) and compromise your identity. The best way to avoid this trick is to visit [AnnualCreditReport.com](https://www.annualcreditreport.com) or call (877) 322-8228 to request your free credit report. No googling required.

“[Company] customer service number”: If you have to google the contact information for a company’s customer service department, make sure the link you click or the number you call is legitimate. Check the source URL and make sure it’s the official website by hovering (not clicking) your mouse over the link. You can see if there is a hidden URL and verify its legitimacy. If you do click on the link, review the “about us” or “contact us” page for anything fishy before sharing your PII.

“High paying remote job”: If it sounds too good to be true, it usually is. It might be a good idea to google the job offer together with the words “fraud” or “scam” to see if others have reported the job offers as fraudulent. Red flags could include vague job descriptions, posts that are months old, and HR inquiries sent from free email domains like @gmail.

“Free people finder”: People searching, or “creeping,” is a common practice these days, and easier than ever, given how much of our PII is likely scattered across the internet. “People finder” websites may be just a way to entice you to give up your money and your PII. Instead, consider using one of the many free, legal, and legitimate ways to find information on someone, like the white pages, public records requests, social media, reverse image searches, and inmate searches.

“Best crypto wallet”: If you invest in cryptocurrency, then you have to have a place to store your coins. Searching Google for this service may expose you to scammers. Thoroughly research all options through reliable sources and seek the advice of reputable financial planners before making a final choice.

Google is an excellent source of information, but it can also be the tool a scammer uses to steal your money and/or your identity. Be aware and google wisely.

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.

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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.