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ATTORNEY GENERAL WARNS CONSUMERS TO WATCH FOR BOGUS ONLINE ENTITIES USING ND ADDRESSES IN SCAMS

BISMARCK – Attorney General Wayne Stenehjem is warning consumers nationwide about online scams ripping off consumers by pretending to be legitimate North Dakota businesses. While no North Dakotans are known to have fallen for the scams, the Attorney General's office has received complaints from victims outside the state.

Scammers such as EuroTrans Group, Safe Collect, Ltd., DA Shipping, Inc. and Primewest Lending Group operate over the internet and claim to sell automobiles and other big-ticket items which they claim are located in North Dakota, or to offer advance-fee loans. Consumers responding to the advertisements are directed to wire payment outside of the United States, in recent cases to Scotland, Hungary and Canada. The consumer sends the money but receives nothing in return.

"Occasionally we hear that scammers are pretending to be in North Dakota, presumably because North Dakotans have a reputation for honesty and fair dealing," said Attorney General Stenehjem. "I'm concerned consumers would pay tens of thousands of dollars to purchase an item they've never seen, from someone they've never met, in a country they've never been to, based on an ad on the Internet. Unfortunately, once it has been wired, the money is gone."

On their websites the companies may claim to have offices in Fargo, Bismarck or Devils Lake; but, the addresses are fakes. In one instance a consumer wired \$71,000 to Hungary for a 2006 Lamborghini Gallardo, purportedly registered in Florida but located at an address in North Dakota. The address turned out to be a pizza restaurant. The scammers also use telephone numbers with a "701" area code; but, these numbers are believed to be voice over internet protocol ("VOIP") numbers which are internet-based telephone services which can originate from virtually any location in the world. One "701" phone number used has been traced to a VOIP provider in Luxembourg. Website and e-mail registrations have been traced to France and the United Kingdom.

Complaints have been made to the Better Business Bureau, which lists the North Dakota addresses on its website, but consumers should not mistake the listing of the companies on the BBB website as proof that the companies actually exist or are legitimate. One resource for consumers looking to see if a business actually exists in North Dakota is the Secretary of State's web page at <https://secure.apps.state.nd.us/sc/busnsrch/busnSearch.htm>.