MIAMI - Attorney General Charlie Crist today advised Floridians affected by Hurricane Katrina to use extra caution when hiring workers to help clean up the damage caused by the storm. In particular, the Attorney General warned those who are victims of flooding to be alert for contractors who offer water removal services from homes and property.

With so many Floridians facing the prospect of removing significant amounts of water from their property, it is likely that legitimate contractors will be mixed with those seeking to profit at the expense of storm victims. Consumers face the risk that services will be offered by those who are not licensed, that clean-up services will be offered at unconscionable prices, or that so-called “contractors” will accept down payments but will not do the work at all.

"More than a million Floridians are without power and many are victims of flooding," said Crist. "Understandably, those affected are anxious to put their lives back together as soon as possible, but they need to protect themselves from con artists. We will pursue anyone who tries to prey on those who are suffering."

The Attorney General provided a series of guidelines for consumers to protect themselves from unscrupulous water removal contractors – or any other repair contractors, including:

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

Crist also advised residents to report suspected cases of price gouging, which can carry stiff penalties following a gubernatorial declaration of a state of emergency. Criminal and civil investigators from the Attorney General's Office have been mobilized statewide for a crackdown on price gouging on items that are in high demand following a hurricane such as food, water, hotels, ice, gasoline, lumber and generators.

In 2004, the Attorney General filed suit against a south Florida renovator for gouging victims of flooding originating from Hurricane Charley. That case is still pending. During last year's record-setting hurricane season, the Attorney General's Office received 8,911 complaints through its price gouging hotline. The office initiated 58 formal investigations and filed 13 price gouging lawsuits against hotels, generator businesses, tree removal companies and other businesses. To date the Attorney General's Office has recovered more than $700,000 in restitution for Florida consumers from settlements and other resolutions. Other investigations and settlement negotiations are ongoing, including two subpoenas served to date as a result of alleged price gouging from Hurricane Dennis.

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.