

Reports

- Car-history reports 51
- Luxury and three-row SUVs 52
- Ford Ranger pickup 59

Cars

Road tests, auto products, hot topics



NEWS

Don't rely on used-car-history reports

WHEN LEZLIE SIMMONS, a homemaker from San Jose, Calif., bought a 2007 Toyota Camry last July, she relied on the “clean” Carfax history report that the dealership provided as proof that the vehicle was accident-free. She has since discovered that the vehicle had been in a major accident. It has needed \$4,000 in repairs, and her car’s factory warranty might be void. Simmons has hired a lawyer to try to get her money back from the dealership.

Many dealerships provide free history reports to consumers. Those reports provide useful information, but it’s what they can miss that should worry you.

To test the veracity of history reports, we ordered them for dozens of vehicles advertised online. The vehicles’ owners disclosed serious dents or other accident-related

damage, along with vehicle identification numbers (VINs) and photos.

Many reports returned “clean” results, sometimes from all five services: Carfax (www.carfax.com), AutoCheck (www.autocheck.com), the free VINCheck from the National Insurance Crime Bureau (www.nicb.org), and two services providing information from the federal government’s National Motor Vehicle Title Information Systems database (www.nmvtis.gov).

We found that the reports were most likely to be incorrect for vehicles that had serious damage but for various reasons were not declared a total loss.

“Salvage,” or similar branding on the vehicle title, is required by many states for vehicles with extensive damage. Wrecks can maintain clean titles if the vehicle doesn’t have collision insurance; is self-insured, as with many rental and fleet vehicles; or has damage falling just below the “total loss” threshold, which can vary by state.

Clean-title wrecks are popular at auctions because buyers can repair the vehicles and then resell them to unsuspecting consumers.

Based on our findings, Carfax says it will begin looking for such vehicles and see if it’s possible to include the results. Consumers Union, the nonprofit publisher of CONSUMER REPORTS, would like to see all commercial history-reports services follow that practice.

How to check out that used car

Have the vehicle inspected. Before you buy a used car, take it to an independent mechanic to have it checked for any evidence of prior damage.

Don’t skip the test drive. Make note of unusual squeaks or rattles. If a car pulls to one side, that might hint at previous damage. Check the backs of body panels and door jambs for paint overspray, a signal that the car might have had body work. The smell of mildew or mold could indicate water damage.

Ask the seller for a history report. If the report isn’t recent or you suspect it has missing or fabricated information, verify it with the service. Some dealer Web sites have free links to reports from the services.

Be redundant. Just because one report is clean, another might not be. If you are not provided with a report from the seller, check with the free or inexpensive services first. Although in our tests VINCheck wasn’t as thorough as commercial reports, it identified vehicles that had been deemed a total loss. Because of regulations newly enacted after our test, National Motor Vehicle Title Information Systems reports, which cost a few dollars, should find vehicles sold through insurance salvage auctions, including clean-title wrecks. If reports from those sources are clean, consider also getting one from Carfax (\$30) and AutoCheck (\$15). Along with total-loss information, they might provide warnings about odometer tampering and non-total-loss collisions.

Remember, even clean reports from all services don’t guarantee that the vehicle doesn’t have damage or other problems.

2007 ACURA MDX SPORT PACKAGE

INSURANCE AUCTION VEHICLE DETAILS

Vehicle: 2007 ACURA MDX SPORT PACKAGE
VIN: 2HNYD28817H545699
Title: NM CLEAR CONSIGNMENT

CLEAN MACHINE? This is an online ad for an Acura MDX. A history report did not indicate any problems with the vehicle.