

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release:
February 17, 2006

Contact: Christina Kotsalos
Investor Education Coordinator
717.783.4247

STATE SECURITIES REGULATORS RELEASE LIST OF INVESTOR TRAPS FOR 2006

Personal Information Cons Lead the List of “Not-So-Sweet” 16 Scams

HARRISBURG, Pa. (February 17, 2006) – The Pennsylvania Securities Commission today outlines a forecast of the 16 most common ways investors are likely to be cheated in 2006.

“This list is anything but sweet,” said Pennsylvania Securities Commission Chairman A. Richard Gerber. “Investment scams can be devastating for the investor who falls victim, both financially and emotionally. Scams come in many disguises, but they all share a common goal: separating victims from their money.”

While the traps below are listed alphabetically, personal information scams, oil and gas investment fraud, and prime bank schemes are the greatest potential threats to investors this year.

- 1) **Affinity Fraud:** Members of closely-knit religious, political or ethnic groups are targeted frequently by con artists. Their pitch is essentially, “since I am like you and believe like you, you can believe in me and in what I say.” When an investment is presented in this context, the potential investor should be extremely wary. This pitch seeks to substitute an emotional appeal for careful analysis and critical thought.
- 2) **Churning:** An abusive sales practice in which unethical securities professionals make more trades than necessary, or even meaningless trades, in order to generate commissions. Most churning occurs where a broker has discretion to trade the account. In such cases, it is not necessary that the broker receive prior approval from the client to complete a transaction.
- 3) **Equity Indexed Certificates of Deposit:** Remember the days of FDIC-insured, bank-issued certificates of deposit with guaranteed principal and interest? Equity Indexed CDs are not the same product. These hybrid securities products offer an interest coupon payment or return that is based on a stock market index, usually the S&P 500. Returns are not FDIC insured. They are dependent on the performance of the stock market. These are complex securities that promise a rate

of return calculated over a defined period of time based upon some form of securities market index. A declining stock market means the possibility of no return on your investment. As a Result, these products pose liquidity problems and are, therefore, not suitable for seniors who may need the money for retirement living.

- 4) **Oil and Gas Investment Fraud:** High oil prices mean oil and gas scams will continue to attract victims. Oil and gas deals are complicated investments that generally require a significant investment, often requiring a minimum deposit of thousands of dollars. Increasingly, these deals are being promoted via the Internet with claims of attractive tax advantages. Sales materials with “official-looking” surveyor maps and “geologist” opinion letters touting the likelihood that the “managers” of the drilling enterprise will hit pay dirt are sent regularly to prospective investors more than 1,000 miles from the region being “prospected.” Overall, these deals are highly risky, but the lure of high profits often proves irresistible to investors.
- 5) **Personal Information Scams:** The first step in separating the victim from the money is convincing the victim to divulge personal financial information. When the sales agent is a local tax preparer or unaffiliated insurance agent, he or she enjoys a position of trust in the community. Con artists not enjoying such a position of trust frequently style themselves as “senior specialists” or adopt a pretext of preparing a “living will” or “living trust.” A pretext that is of current concern to insurance and securities regulators is the offer to help senior citizens qualify for prescription benefits by preparing forms. In the guise of filling out forms, the scamster may ask unnecessary questions about personal financial assets. To the con artist, this information provides a comprehensive laundry list of what is available for the taking.
- 6) **Prime Bank Schemes:** People who hold strong anti-tax or anti-governmental political beliefs are often targets for scams that promise high-yield, tax-free returns. Sometimes these are said to result from “off-shore trades of bank debentures.” Investors are told that only very wealthy people can get the benefit of these programs but the promoter is able to make it available to the victim. Sometimes the victim is required to execute a “confidentiality agreement” in order to invest and is told not to consult an attorney, accountant or financial planner because they keep these programs for the “big boys” and will deny that they exist. There are no such programs, no such debentures and no such high-yield trades. These prime bank schemes are the securities equivalent of a purse snatch. Once the seller has your money, it’s gone “off shore” forever.
- 7) **Pump and Dump Schemes.** Unethical broker-dealers frequently “pump” up the value of low-priced securities traded on the NASDAQ “pink sheets” and then “dump” the stock after naïve investors have purchased the stock at inflated prices. The balloon breaks when the promoters no longer maintain the myth that there is value in the shares and investors are left holding worthless shares.

- 8) **Recovery Rooms.** Scam artists buy and sell the names and financial information of victims who have lost money to “recover room” operators who promise, in return for a fee that the victim must pay in advance, to recover the money lost in a worthless investment. These “sucker lists” are bought by crooks who know that people who have been deceived once are vulnerable to additional scams, especially scams that give hope of recovering lost money. If you have been the victim of a fraud, never give out your credit card or other personal information to someone who contacts you with a promise to recover your money. Remember, in the scam world, this caller is known as a “reloader” and he is setting you up for a second bite at the apple.

- 9) **Registered High-Interest Promissory Notes Publicly Advertised:** Generally, the higher the return promised, the greater the risk to your money. A track record of paying high interest and repaying principal is not an assurance that you will get your money back if the company fails. These notes are not suitable for retirement funds.

- 10) **Sale and Leaseback Contracts:** In an attempt to avoid the investor protections of securities laws, some investments are structured to resemble the sale of a piece of equipment such as a payphone, ATM machine or Internet booth located at a remote venue where the investor cannot service and maintain the equipment and must enter into a servicing agreement. In order to make the deal more attractive, investors are told that after a given period the equipment can be sold back to the seller at the investor’s original purchase price. The investor also is promised a specific rate of return. In a variation of this scheme, a real estate interest such as a long-term lease in a resort community is sold instead of physical equipment. Frequently the equipment or property does not exist and the seller lacks the financial capacity to keep the promise of repurchase.