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From the July 12, 2002 print edition
Mold Rush

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When it comes to finding mold, dogs may be man's best friend

Kelly Johnson Staff Writer

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Picture a small merry-go-round with six spokes, each ending in a closed container. Bill Whitstine spins it, then walks around the edge with his 2-year-old Jack Russell terrier, Pete.

"Show me," he repeatedly urges the dog, until Pete plops down and pushes his nose into a container. "Good boy," Whitstine says, giving Pete a treat.

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The mold dog has done it again -- found the hidden mold. And that's the reason he has come from Florida to the terrace of the Sacramento Capitol Club this mid-June day.

The board of directors of Healthy Indoor Environment Inc., a Fair Oaks nonprofit trying to help solve the mold problem, has invited Whitstine because the group thinks mold dogs are promising, and wants to research their use.

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Fewer than five U.S. companies use mold dogs so far, but advocates see them as a useful, even friendly way to find unseen mold. Whitstine just sold his first mold dog, and expects to sell a couple hundred more in the next few years.

"Right now you tear up the building until you find it," Whitstine says. "That's chaos."

Recognized in Europe: Mold dogs have been used for close to 20 years in

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Europe, says David Harvey, vice president of business development for Trade-Winds Environmental Restoration Inc., a mold remediation company in Bay Shore, N.Y. "It's sort of a known commodity over there."

Trade-Winds has been using mold-sniffing canines for two years, and currently has three Labradors assigned to the task.

The Scandinavian countries in particular are sensitive to mold issues. Experts there have been researching it for at least five years, says Sandra McNeel, a research scientist with the Environmental Health Investigations Branch of the state Department of Health Services.

Energy costs more in that part of the world than it does here, which encouraged the construction of well-insulated buildings. If well-insulated buildings aren't properly ventilated, mold grows more easily.

The governments of Sweden and Denmark use large teams of dogs to detect mold in government buildings. Private companies use them too, Harvey says, including German firms.

Harvey had heard of the Florida company and its good reputation.

"They're very effective," he says. Mold dogs can pinpoint areas that may have been missed by other kinds of searches.

A mold dog can get to places faster than people, and can detect mold in places that people can't reach, says Alan Borner, head of Healthy Indoor Environment. Human inspectors might be in a building for four hours, he adds, before deciding to take a sledgehammer to the walls.

A mold dog might just need to use its nose.

The tell-tale scratch: Here's a typical scenario without a mold dog. Inspectors are called out to investigate. They take an air sample. The property owner waits seven to 10 days for results. With positive results, the walls and baseboards might be ripped out. The area is cleaned and another air sample is taken.

Another wait for test results follows.

Meanwhile, the mold could have spread during the remediation process, says Whitstine, chief executive officer of the Florida Canine Academy.

Mold dogs won't replace anyone. But his dogs will save time and be more accurate, he says.

For consumers, that means less time out of the home. For insurers, if the investigation and remediation are covered, that means less expense.

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"The dogs are used as part of an investigative team," Harvey says.

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A handler takes two or three dogs to a site, along with a human investigator. When a dog indicates an area has mold by scratching at a wall, then the investigator may open the wall cavity.

Mold dogs usually don't show any harm from their work. That's because their time near mold is limited. They don't put in an eight-hour shift like their human counterparts.

The dogs are exposed to the mold's volatile organic compounds, which Harvey says emit that musty odor, but they don't touch mold.

Some examples mold dogs in Europe have become hypersensitive and had to retire, he says. But Harvey says his dogs at Trade-Winds haven't been hurt.

No. 1 sells for \$9,700: Whitstine prefers to get healthy, eager dogs from the animal shelter. He uses a variety of breeds, including beagles. They have a strong food drive.

Whitstine has been training mold dogs for five years. He recently sold his first one, for \$9,700. He says potential buyers include home inspectors, microbiologists, forensics companies and entrepreneurs.

He has five dogs available. He hopes to have 10 by November.

Whitstine has previously been featured on "Animal Planet" and The Discovery Channel for his termite and arson dogs. In the last five years, he has sold 90 termite dogs. Within the next two or three years, he expects to sell 180 mold dogs.

People often don't see termites, he says, so they can ignore any problem. People are more likely to see mold and want to eliminate it.

Pete has been training to find mold every day since he was 10 or 11 months old. "It's not really work," Whitstine says. "It's a joy to him."

The lidded container holds only a tiny amount of mold. Considering that mold is all around us, Pete is trained to find only the types that bother anyone.

"One drop," Whitstine explains, "smells the same to them as a gallon to us."

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