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GOVERNMENT

Sacramento Opens State's First Canine Mold-Finding Service

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Man's best friend has just made a bunch of new friends in the commercial real estate industry. That's because property owners, property managers, tenants, owners and attorneys are being introduced to dogs specifically trained to sniff out mold in buildings.

The dogs can pinpoint the presence of mold in commercial and residential settings and help reduce the time, money and frustration associated with mold inspection and cleanup work.

Mold has become synonymous with rising operational costs — rising insurance premiums and liability, particularly among apartment owners. The mold remediation market is now estimated at \$3 billion nationwide, and the Insurance Information Institute reports that most insurers saw triple-digit increases in the frequency of commercial mold-related claims in 2002.

Moreover, the state's commercial real estate industry faces stiff new guidelines on mold disclosure to prospective tenants and buyers under SB732. Known as the Toxic Mold Protection Act, the bill, which went into effect Jan. 1, also requires commercial property managers and owners to remediate if mold is found in their buildings.

The provisions of the act will be formalized six months after the state adopts exposure limits to toxic molds and produces guidelines for identifying and

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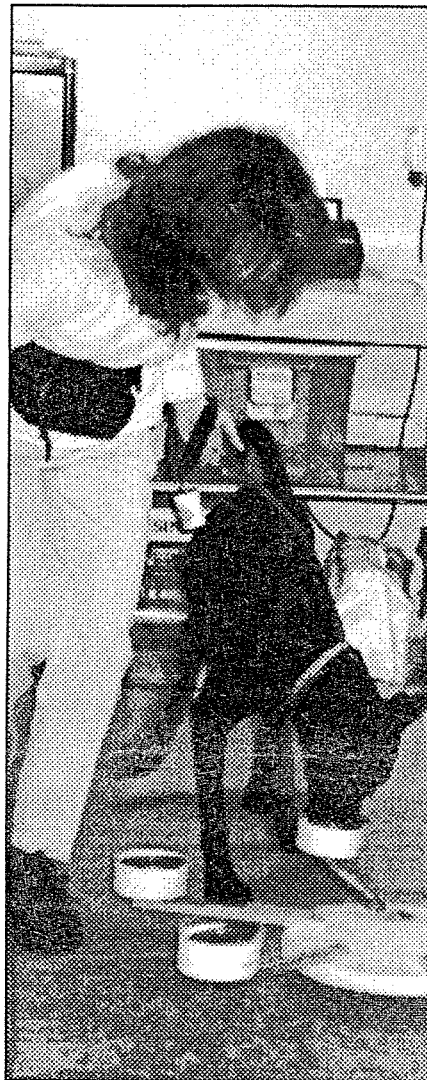


PHOTO BY GREG CAMPBELL

Pamela Demarest of Mold Detectives Inc. trains daily with Sydney, a Labrador-hound mix trained to detect mold. Demarest uses the training wheel to keep Sydney's nose keen when the dog isn't sniffing for mold in commercial and residential properties. The Roseville-based mold detection company has one of the first mold-finding dogs in California.

Inspections

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remediating mold.

Going to the Dogs

Mold Detectives Inc. of Roseville claims to have the first certified mold dog in the state. The company bought its dog, Sydney, a female Labrador and hound mix from Mold Dog Inc., a division of the Florida K-9 Academy, which trains and certifies dogs to detect bombs and drugs.

The company, which began training and certifying mold dogs last fall, says there are only about 10 certified mold dogs nationwide. Sacramento has three of them, which isn't surprising considering the region's propensity for mold problems due to heat and humidity.

Sacramento's A-1 Canine Mold Detection has two beagles from Mold Dog Inc. David Rinderneck, who co-owns A-1 Canine Mold Detection with family members, has been contacting local real estate industry professionals.

So far, they've had a good response from attorneys, property managers for apartments and commercial buildings, real estate agents and homeowners, Rinderneck said.

David Frenznick, a Sacramento attorney with Wilke Fleury Hoffelt Gould & Birney who practices primarily in the construction-defect arena, sees several benefits in using dogs to inspect for potential mold problems.

"We've been struggling with the tremendous cost with even having a preliminary assessment of the situation," Frenznick said.

Finding mold often calls for destructive testing, he said. Walls are torn down, but that doesn't mean mold will be found.

"To be able to take a dog in and identify areas that are a concern — whereas before we'd do hit-and-miss kinds of deals — that's a big deal for us," he said. "If we're looking for mold and a dog can tell us where to look, we have just saved a tremendous amount of time and money."

But Frenznick doesn't think the mold dogs will completely eliminate the need for traditional air or dust sampling. Rather, the dogs can be another tool used in the assessment of a building, he said.

"With the dogs, they can sniff and tell you where the source is from," Rinderneck said. "It pinpoints where the mold is present, and then you work from there."

The dogs also bring peace of mind to people worried about the possibility of mold in their buildings.

"Anytime you say 'mold,' especially in the commercial setting, you have a potential public relations nightmare," Frenznick said.

From Bombs to Mold

Mold Detectives began two years ago in response to the increase in mold issues in the real estate industry, according to Russ Colliau, president.

More dogs were being used to inspect for bombs following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, he noticed. And dogs have long

When doing a canine search, the detection dog will walk through a property room by room. If the dog smells mold, it will point to the location with its nose.

At this point, Mold Detectives recommends traditional air testing to determine the type of mold present.

Jim Hoppe, a general contractor with Sierra General Construction, has repaired dry rot for 20 years. He has seen a mold dog in action and was impressed with its ability to locate mold.

"People who don't have pets think it's a dog-and-pony show, and it's not," Demarest said.

Frenznick agreed.

"If they're using dogs to sniff for drugs and sausages in people's overnight bags as they come off a plane, then I certainly don't

"Maybe there's no problem," Demarest said. "Then you have peace of mind."

Training Required

The dogs trained by Mold Dog Inc. come from the Humane Society and undergo between 600 and 1,000 hours of training, said Bill Whitstine, who started the mold-training program about five years ago for the insurance industry.

The company's first mold dog went to Oregon in September and Mold Dog has sold about 10 dogs since. Another 19 mold dogs are on order through April.

California may be getting three more dogs, with dogs scheduled for training to go to San Diego, San Francisco and Los Angeles, Whitstine said.

"This is a booming industry, and the dogs are the best tools to come along in that industry since the air sampler," he said.

When a mold problem becomes apparent, the dogs can pinpoint the mold, which shortens the amount of time people are out of their building. It also allows for quicker cleanup and more accurate retesting, he said.

"The air sampler tells you have mold, but where?" he said. "Imagine, you take all the carpet out, furniture out and take out the walls just to find it in one room and in one corner. But the dog has the X-ray eyes for it. He uses his X-ray nose. The dog shows you, and we can confirm it with an air sampler."

So far, Mold Dog's main commercial customers have been inspectors or people doing remediation.

Entrepreneurs also are buying into the program. But there's much to consider before signing up for a mold dog.

"It's not just a tool you can pull out of your bag whenever you need it," Colliau said.

All told, the dog costs about \$15,000, Colliau said. Those costs include the dog, the initial training and the dog handler's five-day training in Florida.

Recertification of the dog and the dog handler is a minimum of \$500 each quarter, he said. Then there's the customary food and medical costs for keeping the dog.

Demarest trained with Sydney in Florida, and continues to train Sydney every day. She cares for the animal at home and at work.

"It's a very challenging thing to have a scent-detection dog," she said. "It's not for everyone."

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David Frenznick
Wilke Fleury Hoffelt Gould & Birney

been used to sniff out drugs, cadavers, arson and pests.

A dog's sense of smell is about 1 million times more sensitive than a human's, and is more powerful than most scientific instruments.

"It just made sense that dogs could inspect for mold," Colliau said.

Now, the Roseville-based company does between 40 and 50 mold investigations each month, nearly double the volume prior to using detecting dogs.

Dogs also allow mold-detection companies to handle more jobs because they help cut down on inspection time.

By the end of the year, Colliau expects to have three to five mold dogs and conduct about 100 mold inspections a month.

"Air testing is like driving blind," said Pamela Demarest, a certified mold dog handler with Mold Detectives.

think this is outside the realm of acceptable science," he said.

Mold investigations generally cost somewhere between \$1,200 and \$2,500 just to check for mold, Colliau said. For example, testing a four-bedroom house the traditional way could cost \$2,000. If mold is found, another \$4,000 to \$20,000 in testing could be necessary.

In comparison, an inspection with a trained dog can cost less than \$500, Colliau said.

A-1 Canine Mold Detection, charges a \$200 flat fee for the dog and \$120 for the dog handler's first two hours. Then, it's \$60 for each additional dog-handler hour. Air sampling runs \$50 per room.

The reduced inspection costs of dog detection means owners can use the service for preventive maintenance and the results can be used as a negotiating tool.