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New Dog Knows Mold Tricks

Year-Old Max Touted As Texas' First Mold-Detecting Dog

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COLLEGE STATION, Texas -- Texas A&M University veterinary school officials and a Houston businessman Thursday showed off Max, a year-old border collie and Labrador retriever mix who's being touted as the state's first mold-detecting dog.

"We have been able to tap into a very wonderful sensory capability in a species we live with for the benefit of humans and the enjoyment of the animal," said Bonnie Beaver, professor of small animal medicine and surgery at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine. "That's one of the plusses."

"He seems to enjoy it," said Eric Voss, who earned a graduate business degree from A&M in 1987, runs The Allergy & Health Store in Houston and is Max's owner. "He sniffs everything in a room."

Max is a product of the Florida Canine Academy, a Clearwater, Fla.-based company that trains dogs for detection of explosives, drugs, money and now mold. Similar dogs have been introduced to markets in Florida and California. Max, who's undergone more than 1,000 hours of training since he was plucked from an animal shelter, is the first in Texas, Voss said.

"He's been taught to communicate," Voss said. "He's been taught to inspect homes for mold. I anticipate Max will be very successful."

At Texas A&M on Thursday, Max went through what was billed as his pre-employment physical before showing off his skills for reporters.

Urged by Voss to "Seek, seek!" Max sniffed at a series of closed containers before stopping at one that contained mold. He sat, looked up at Voss, pointed his nose back at the mold discovery, then with his tail wagging was rewarded with a treat -- a piece of food.

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Mold is a big business in Texas, which in 2001 accounted for 70 percent of all mold claims filed in the United States, according to the Texas Coalition for Affordable Insurance Solutions. Mold claims and remediation costs have been cited by insurance companies for soaring rates, particularly on homeowner policies. Mold also has been blamed for contributing to allergy problems in people. The humid, hot climate along the Texas Gulf Coast especially is conducive for growth of mold.

Voss, who said the services of his dog would cost customers upward of \$500, said the dog's nose is more sensitive than more expensive mechanical devices in locating "microbial volatile compounds," meaning the dog can detect the source of mold more quickly. The idea is to use Max's efficiency to help reduce insurance remediation costs and ultimately contribute to lower insurance rates.

In a typical mold investigation, Voss said some of the cost is for laboratory testing of samples that may wind up negative for mold.

"Max becomes very valuable in that he pinpoints your laboratory sampling to areas he believes through his ultrasensitive nose have a high probability of mold," Voss said.

Compared to a dog, a human's sense of smell is no contest, Beaver said.

"The dog's brain area, the smell area, is over 10 times larger than it is in humans," she said. "But it's hard to set up studies that tell us exactly how good it is.

"It is so sensitive we can't even appreciate how well they can detect."

While Texas A&M has no business connection to Max, Beaver said the school is interested in the dog's abilities and in keeping him healthy. He will return to the school for periodic medical examinations.

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