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Living

Posted on Mon, Jun. 02, 2003

PIONEER PRESS

This mutt knows mold

BY RICHARD CHIN
 Pioneer Press

When we heard that a Twin Cities mold-cleanup company was touting a "certified mold dog" as the only four-legged mold-detection tool in the state, we thought, heck, let's get that mutt in here.

We like to think there's a lot of muckraking that occurs in this newsroom, not to mention coffeepot spills, so if a mold-sniffing dog can't find something musty around here, they should send it back to the pound.

Which is how we ended up meeting Watson, a 2-year-old, 20-pound fox terrier animal shelter refugee who is the pride and joy of Mold Masters Inc. of Anoka.

Mold Masters is a new company started by Tony McFarland, a 30-year veteran of the commercial cleaning business. McFarland saw a new opportunity in the emerging world of health-threatening indoor mold and using dogs to combat it.

Mold-sniffing dogs, which are trained much like bomb- or drug-detection dogs, have been used in Europe for 10 years, according to McFarland. But they're new in the United States. McFarland said Watson is one of about three dozen mold-sniffing dogs now working in this country.

McFarland said he paid more than \$12,000 for his dog, the product of more than 500 hours of training. He said he has another dog on order from the Florida-based trainer who provided Watson.

THE PROBLEM

Molds can trigger asthma episodes or allergic responses in some individuals, and more serious reactions blamed on some types of mold include fevers and lung infections. Some experts say indoor

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mold problems have increased because of modern home design that creates airtight buildings that trap moisture behind walls.

The state health department says if you are worried about mold, you can try to sniff out the problem yourself.

"The most practical way to find a mold problem is by using your eyes to look for mold growth and by using your nose to locate the source of a suspicious odor. If you see mold or if there is an earthy or musty smell, you should assume a mold problem exists," according to the department's Web site. Signs of excess moisture or water damage or worsening of allergylike symptoms are other clues that mold abounds.

McFarland, however, said that because dogs' noses are more sensitive than humans', Watson can be helpful in pinpointing hidden sources of mold without having to tear open walls.

"They're smelling machines, basically," he said. "It's a noninvasive type of tool."

He said his company charges about \$500 to \$1,000 to do an inspection with the dog.

"We've heard of it," Dan Tranter, a research scientist with the state department of health, said of the mold-sniffing dog. "We don't know if it works. We don't regulate mold remediators or investigators in this state."

THE PROBE

Here in the newsroom, Watson stopped, barked or pawed at the obvious suspects: the office refrigerator and the carpeting near the former water fountain that leaked. But Watson, who got dog-food snacks as his reward, also nosed the copy machine in the editorial department.

"We used to have our coffee machine there, and it spilled over quite often. That doesn't surprise me," a co-worker said.

A bookshelf with some old catalogs also was a problem area, according to the dog.

"I call it the Louis L'Amour syndrome," McFarland said. In other words, cheap pulp paperbacks that can be mold havens. "He also hits on moldy shoes."

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