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Mold detection industry goes to the dogs

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Stephanie
Basalyga



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Man's best friend is about to become mold's worst enemy in the Portland metro area.

At least that's the idea behind Common Scents Inspections, a Camas, Wash., company whose main employee is a Jack Russell terrier named One-Eyed Jack, one of only 30 canines in the country to carry a designation as a certified mold-detection dog.

In Jack's case, the title is longer than he is. At 18-months old, Jack is true to his breed – a compact bundle of energy, often exploding in a series of leaps and enthusiastic tail wags. Until it's time to go to work, sniffing out mold hiding behind baseboards and walls in houses, office buildings and schools.

Mold-detection dogs have already proved their worth in European countries such as Denmark and Germany, where mold has been known for decades to be a problem in buildings.

But in the United States – although it’s quickly grown into a headache for homeowners, insurance companies and building contractors – mold only began gaining attention a few years ago.

Which may explain why the idea of using canines to find mold hidden behind walls and floors raises more than a few eyebrows, even though scent dogs have earned respect in America for sniffing out drugs and arson.

“People are used to air-sampling methods as traditionally the only method available for finding mold, and a lot of people are resistant to change,” said Eric Johnson, Jack’s owner and founder of Common Scents Inspections.

He refers to a method by which samples of air are taken from a building suspected to be affected by mold. The samples are then sent to a lab where tests are run to determine the molds present.

Seeking out the samples

Johnson, however, collects his mold samples using a method called “lift testing.”

The process begins with Jack moving along floorboards and baseboards in a room in a building, dabbing his nose along the surfaces while Johnson encourages him to “seek, seek, seek.”

When Jack picks up a scent, he drops into a sitting position and looks up at Johnson. A little more urging from his master – “show me, show me” – and Jack nudges a specific area with his nose.

That’s when Johnson goes to work, cutting a small, half-inch-wide hole in the wall. Then he uses a special tool fitted with an adhesive to take a “tape lift” sample of the mold.

“A tape lift is basically a snapshot of what’s growing there, whether the mold is active or dormant, even how old it is,” said scientist Bob Lanier.

It’s also the type of sample preferred by Mould Works, the Eugene mold-testing laboratory company that Lanier started a few months ago with George Carroll, a scientist who has specialized in studying mold during his 35 years as a professor at the University of Oregon.

Carroll and Lanier firmly believe that air testing isn't always the most efficient and cost-effective way to track down mold in buildings.

"All you get from air samples is whether you have interior mold, not where it's located," Lanier said.

And unlike detection-by-dog, which can pinpoint exact locations of both visible and invisible mold, air testing only indicates that a room contains mold spores. Tracking down where mold may be located to clean the area usually requires ripping out walls and ceilings.

Finding what humans can't

Detection dogs also offer a possible solution to a dilemma that has stumped both the scientific community and building inspectors: how to find mold invisible to the human eye even after walls are removed.

"Dogs are incredibly sensitive to mold," Lanier said. "They can detect it through walls, the molecules get out through cracks in the walls. If a dog can't find mold, it isn't there."

Johnson, a building inspector with firsthand experience in the challenges of trying to track down mold in buildings, agrees with the assessment that air testing isn't the best method. He was looking for a better way to perform his job when he heard about a man named Bill Whitstine.

The founder of Florida Canine Academy, Whitstine had already built a reputation for training dogs to track down termites and cases of arson. Now the man, a master trainer certified by the Maine State Police Canine Academy, was also training dogs to sniff out mold in buildings.

Whitstine's been turning out mold dogs for the past six years. While his protégées come with certifications of competence, they don't come with papers boasting their pedigrees. Instead, Whitstine canvasses Human Society shelters in Florida, looking for dogs that show a high energy level and are friendly with people.

One sensitive nose

It was during one of those shelter visits that Whitstine noticed Jack. Born without an eye, Jack was on his second go-around at the shelter, brought there first by the person

who bred him and then by an owner who couldn't cope with his physical deformity.

Where others saw a handicap, however, Whitstine saw an asset when it came to sniffing out mold, said Tovey Giezentanner, a consultant who works with Whitstine.

"Dogs see about 90 percent of the world through their noses, so not having an eye doesn't interfere," Giezentanner said.

Like all of Whitstine's mold dogs, Jack underwent 1,000 hours of training. Then he spent another week of Florida-based training with Johnson, who purchased the dog for \$12,500. He'll have to attend an annual training session at Whitstine's academy each year in order to maintain his certification as a mold dog.

"He knows what he's doing; I'm pretty much the dummy," Johnson said. "He has subtle nuances, and my job is to learn to interpret them."

For more information about Common Scents Inspections, call Johnson at 360-772-0181 or access the company's Web site at www.commonscentsinspections.com.

Stephanie covers law, architecture, engineering and construction for the Daily Journal of Commerce. She can be reached by e-mail at stephanieb@djc-or.com or by phone at 503-221-3313.

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