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Sniffing out hidden danger

By Justin Palk, Times Staff Writer

The handler and his dog moved swiftly through the house, seeking their quarry.

Sniffing beneath the kitchen sink, the animal sits down and points with his nose, indicating he's smelled something suspicious and receiving a mouthful of food from his trainer as a reward.

But the dog, Barney, isn't trained to detect bombs or drugs, he's trained to detect mold.

"He's been trained to the same standards as a bomb dog or an arson dog, he's just trained on mold," said David Marcelli, Barney's owner and proprietor of Westminster's Mold Trackers.

One of only 30 such dogs in the nation, and the only one in Maryland, Barney is trained to detect spores produced by molds that may cause allergies or disease in humans, Marcelli said.

The dogs, 95 percent of which are rescued from shelters, go through 600 to 1,000 hours of training, said Tovey Giezentanner, a consultant with Mold Dog.

Florida-based Mold Dog, whose top trainer, Bill Whitstine, has 15 years of experience in training sniffer dogs, specializes in training dogs to detect mold, he said.

The first trained mold dog went on the market in September of 2002, he said, and while there are some difficulties with developing what is essentially a new market, people are used to trusting dogs to detect hazardous materials.

"The end consumer believes a dog more than he believes people," Giezentanner said.

Keeping Barney certified to detect mold is a lot of work, Marcelli said - you can't just let him run around out back until a call comes in, he said.

Every day, he said, Barney gets to practice on a set of mold samples, and he's recertified every 90 days by Mold Dog. On top of that, Barney's handlers have to recertify yearly, all so there's no question of Barney's accuracy should one of his inspections ever be used in court.

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Ken Koons/Staff Photo
David Marcelli works with Barney, a mold sniffing dog, to find molds growing in buildings.

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"I bought this dog, and gee, I have something strapped to my hip," Marcelli said, noting that the dog even follows his family on vacation.

The two advantages to using a dog for mold detection are accuracy and the dog's ability to detect mold spores nondestructively, Marcelli said.

Envisioned as a supplement to collecting spores and performing lab tests, dogs can be much more specific about where mold is located, even when it isn't visible, Marcelli said, meaning that building owners can be more precise in addressing mold problems.

Molds can grow naturally in places where moisture and the materials they feed on exist, according to information on the Centers for Disease Control's Web page.

Common building materials such as drywall, carpet, ceiling tiles and insulation can all provide places for mold to grow if moisture is present.

Westminster received its first two mold complaints of the year recently, said Scott Jeznach, the city's code enforcement officer.

The city usually gets one or two such complaints a year, although in recent years the drought had cut back on mold problems, he said.

Because no standards for mold exist at the city, county or state level, the city uses reports of mold problems at rental properties as an indicator for other moisture-related problems in the house, Jeznach said. Usually he finds the source of the moisture and has the property owner fix the problem and any associated water damage, he said.

Despite the wet spring, mold hasn't even been brought up at statewide meetings of code enforcement officers, he said, noting that it's an issue largely dealt with in the private sector, rather than by the government.

He characterized mold as a "health awareness" issue rather than a "health threat," noting that mold isn't a really new problem, just one that's receiving more attention.

"The attention profile has just been raised on [mold,]" Jeznach said. "It's just quite like peanut allergies ... Lyme disease and West Nile virus, it's probably always been around, but it's just being talked about more, and that's raising awareness levels."

More information on mold is available from the Environmental Protection Agency at www.epa.gov/iaq/molds/moldresources.html, and from the Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/nceh/airpollution/mold/default.htm.

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