

PROTECTING AMERICA

Help Detector Dogs: Don't Pack A Pest

(NAPSA)—If you've returned to the U.S. from an international trip, you've no doubt seen beagles with blue jackets sniffing luggage in the baggage claim area. Visitors to Hawaii and Puerto Rico may also see these four-legged officers in green jackets helping to find prohibited fruits and vegetables hidden in luggage. As cute as they are, these detector dogs, who work alongside U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials and USDA, are performing an important job. They are helping to keep harmful invasive pests out of our country, including 19 called Hungry Pests, which can severely damage our crops, trees and landscapes.

Invasive pests cost our country \$40 billion each year in damages and related costs. They come from other countries and can spread quickly, since they have few natural predators here. These invasive insects and plant diseases are the reason we are losing oranges to citrus greening disease, and ash trees—a popular shade tree in parks and communities—to the emerald ash borer beetle. But by knowing what not to bring back, you can help protect so much that we love.

Detector dogs help human inspectors catch incoming materials that may be otherwise overlooked. Through their keen sense of smell, the dogs can quickly scan unopened bags and alert USDA and Customs officials as to which ones should be hand-inspected. In fact, dogs are able to detect a single scent among many overlapping ones. And, on average, they have hundreds of millions of scent-detecting cells, as compared to humans, who only have five million.

Why are beagle and beagle mixes chosen for this role? Because of their smaller size and gentle disposition, they are good around people and tend not to be intimidating. They also have a keen appetite, so happily train and work for treats. Most of the dogs come from shel-



USDA detector dogs help keep dangerous pests from America's plants.

ters. Those selected are sent to the USDA National Detector Dog Training Center in Georgia, where they go through rigorous training. Those who successfully complete the program become detector dogs.

Be thankful these dogs are trained to find prohibited items before they enter the States. A seemingly harmless piece of fruit could carry an invasive pest hidden inside. And if it finds its way to your neighborhood, your trees and plants could be its next target for destruction.

So, what is safe to bring back home? Small quantities of canned foods or foods packed in vacuum-sealed jars (except those that contain meat or poultry) are generally allowed. Some fresh fruits, vegetables, plants, flowers and agriculture items may also be allowed, but only after they've been inspected and cleared by USDA or Customs officials. Be sure to visit USDA's "Traveler Information" page before your return trip to learn more and always declare all food, plants and other agriculture items to USDA or Customs officials.

When it comes to protecting our country from invasive pests, you can make all the difference. Be wise when traveling and know what's safe to bring back, so you don't pack a pest. Learn more by visiting www.HungryPests.com.