Upon successful graduation from the training program, detector dogs are at the forefront of the fight to safeguard our Nation's agricultural resources until they are about 9 years old. When a dog is ready to retire, the NDDTC allows the last handler to adopt the dog as a pet.

After 7 years as a detector dog, Bear will enjoy retirement.

How Can I Help?

Contact the NDDTC if you are a rescue organization, shelter, or breeder who would like to have our procurement specialists reach out to discuss testing your dogs for the program. The number of harmful pests and diseases that threaten U.S. agriculture grows each year—and with that, the need for food-motivated, friendly, energetic dogs increases, too.

Also contact us if you would like to be considered as a pet parent to one of the dogs that test out of the program. Animals come up for adoption periodically.

To donate or adopt a dog, call us at (877) 797-3899 or email us at usdacanineadoptions@usda.gov.

National Detector Dog Training Center
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, USDA
360 International Park
Newnan, GA 30265
Toll-Free Phone: 1 (844) 876-3755 or
(770) 304-7925
Email: usdacanineadoptions@usda.gov

Photo Credits: The two images of a beagle wearing a green vest are by Cristóbal Rivera. All other images are by USDA employees Lance Cheung (cover, dog looking at fruit in suitcase); William Cooper (beagle in blue vest); Anson Eaglin (dog in green vest at airport); Aaliyah Essex (black Labrador in car, yellow Labrador next to car); and Suzanne Bond (yellow Labrador with boxes, "Bear" retirement photo).

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THE NATIONAL DETECTOR DOG TRAINING CENTER
Training Agriculture's Best Friend

Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service

Our Goal

The National Detector Dog Training Center (NDDTC), part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), provides highly specialized training for dogs and their handlers. These dog/human teams perform a vital task for our country—they safeguard American agriculture and natural resources from harmful invasive pests and diseases.

At our uniquely designed, state-of-the-art facility in Newnan, GA, the NDDTC trains beagles, beagle mixes, Labrador retrievers, Labrador retriever mixes, and Jack Russell terriers to become detector dogs. After being paired with a handler, these dogs go on to do crucial safeguarding work for USDA, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection, State departments of agriculture, local governments, and international partners.

In the United States alone, detector dog/handler teams are present at more than 90 ports of entry (international airports, land borders, and cargo/shipping/postal facilities) to find illegal agricultural products in mail and courier packages or carried in passenger baggage. These products could expose the United States to dangerous pests and diseases and are seized and destroyed when detected.

Selection and Screening

The NDDTC seeks dogs that are 1 to 3 years old from animal shelters, rescue groups, and private own- ers. The dogs must be friendly and bold, have a high food drive, and be healthy. We test recruited dogs in a real inspection environment to expose them to the sights, sounds, smells, surfaces, and equipment they would encounter there. The dogs also receive a physical examination from a veterinarian. If the dog recruits pass our screening process, they begin training.

Most of the canines we recruit make good detector dogs. Of the 65–80 dogs we train each year on average, roughly 75 percent of them finish the program successfully. If a dog does not complete the training program, the NDDTC makes sure he or she is adopted to a good home.

Training

Our training programs last up to 13 weeks and offer a chance for a detector dog and handler to bond and gain mutual confi- dence and trust. Through daily training, dogs and their handlers develop a close relationship—to the point that the handler is aware of even slight changes in the dog's behavior. Enrichment opportunities, such as play time at the NDDTC's onsite agility center, further ensure the detector dog's well-being.

We use positive reinforcement to train the dogs to detect and signal if they find items of agricultural concern (for example, fruit, pork, or beef) in suitcases, vehicles, and cargo packages.

Dogs learn to associate a reward with the specific odor they are expected to find. The training is simple in the beginning so it is easy for the dog to be successful. The NDDTC Training Specialists gradually increase the difficulty and complexity of the training until the dog can detect the target odors in an actual inspection environment.

The NDDTC trains Jack Russell terriers to find brown treesnakes in aircraft, vehicles, household goods, and ships leaving Guam headed to snake-free areas like Hawaii, the Mariana Islands, and Saipan. Brown treesnakes have led to the extinction of several native bird species in Guam. We have also trained Labrador retrievers to detect nutria, an invasive rodent that destroys wetlands on Maryland's Eastern Shore.