



DETECTOR DOG PROGRAM

WORKING WITH DOGS TO HELP PROTECT AUSTRALIA

Customs Detector Dog Program plays an important role in helping to protect Australia from prohibited imports such as drugs, firearms and explosives. Detector dog teams are trained to find goods hidden in luggage, parcels, mail, cargo containers, vessels, vehicles, aircraft and on people.

In the past, detector dog teams were trained to find only narcotics. But in 2003, in response to the need to strengthen security requirements at Australia's border, the Detector Dog Program was expanded to include firearms and component parts, ammunition, explosives and chemical precursors. This initiative drew on the experience of both domestic and international agencies.

Customs detector dogs also support Federal, State and Territory police and other government agencies in search operations.

NATIONAL BREEDING AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

The Detector Dog Program is vital to Customs border management and has evolved significantly since 1969 when Customs had only two dogs, recruitment being from animal shelters, dog pounds and people with unwanted pets. From these early beginnings the Program continued to grow throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

By the early 1990s, the volume of work led to difficulties in sourcing quality dogs. The Customs Detector Dog Breeding Program was developed to produce a reliable, high-quality supply of dogs.

This development included research into the best breed of dog to meet the requirements of Customs. The Labrador was selected for its focus, versatility, temperament and strong hunt-and-retrieve drives.

A three-year study was held at the Customs National Breeding and Development Centre in Melbourne in conjunction with the University of Melbourne and the Guide Dog Association of Australia.

In early 1993, a three-year pilot breeding program began using Labradors purchased from the Guide Dog Association of Australia

and leading breeders. The first pup, named Fred, was whelped in May of that year.

The result was a dramatic increase in the number of puppies that met Customs standards. The breeding program is now the only source of Customs detector dogs. It promotes a strong gene pool providing healthy, positive dogs that are confident in unfamiliar environments, determined and with an untiring desire to retrieve.

Many other agencies also use dogs bred by Customs, including the Australian Defence Force, the Australian Federal Police, the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service and State and Territory police. Customs-bred dogs have been deployed in a variety of fields, including arson detection, food detection and/or explosives and firearms detection.

The 'puppy foster carer' scheme is a key component of the breeding and development program. Foster families care for pups in their homes for up to 12 months. The pups' progress is monitored as they are socialised into different environments. All food, medical and associated costs are covered by Customs.

Since 1993, Customs has bred more than 1,000 puppies, most of which have been successfully deployed throughout Australia and overseas as operational detector dogs.



TRAINING A DETECTOR DOG TEAM

Customs dogs are trained at the Detector Dog Training Centre in Canberra to detect specific target odours.

Customs focuses on the training of various methodologies, including multi-purpose response dogs. These dogs are capable of searching both people and cargo and can work in Customs search areas. A multi-purpose response dog is trained to give a passive or "sit" response to people carrying or concealing items or a pawing or scratching response to cargo or areas where items might be hidden. This dual capability allows Customs to more effectively deploy detector dogs.

HOW THE DOGS ARE TRAINED

Using retrieval exercises of articles scented with a target odour, the detector dog establishes scent association. After a successful retrieval, the handler rewards the dog with a tug-of-war game and a great deal of praise. But dogs are never fed, dosed or in any way rewarded with narcotics.

Each exercise is designed for challenging and progressive development, using the Labrador's enjoyment of the game as the reward for a job well done.

Detector dog team training also includes introducing the handler and dog to the methods required to effectively search all areas of interest to Customs. Examples include Australian international airports and seaports, mail centres, bond stores and small craft.

Firearms and explosives detector dog teams are now deployed across Australia, conducting Customs searches and assisting State and Federal agencies. As part of the Government's increased security measures for air cargo, the May 2006 Budget provided Customs with funding for an additional 20 teams to be directed towards export cargo screening.

This will provide Customs with a highly effective and flexible firearms and explosives detection capability, able to be deployed at short notice to a variety of locations.

RESULTS

Detector dogs find prohibited imports at Australia's international ports, mail centres, during the execution of search warrants at premises and in joint agency operations. Their versatility and effectiveness is demonstrated by their detection of unusual drug concealment, including:

- cocaine concealed in letters and books at mail centres
- ecstasy hidden in air freight
- cocaine being carried internally by passengers
- heroin concealed in shampoo bottles.

Significant detections of firearms and explosives include:

- assault rifles and ammunition in premises
- undeclared detonators and detonator cord on board a yacht
- large amounts of explosives, ammunition, and an unlicensed handgun at a remote farmhouse.

NEW DIRECTIONS

While the main focus of the Detector Dog Program is to search for and seize narcotics, firearms and explosives, Customs is continually looking for ways to improve training methods and new applications for detector dog teams. This includes chemical precursors and currency detection.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Customs commitment to world's best practice in the breeding, training and deployment of detector dogs has resulted in the program becoming recognised around the world as a leader in producing and maintaining high-quality detector dog teams.

Assistance with training methods has been provided to Indonesia, Malaysia, Guam, Saipan, Samoa, Papua New Guinea, China, Japan, New Zealand, Thailand and the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian De-mining.

In addition, dogs from the Australian breeding program are working as detector dogs, or have been used to establish new breeding centres in other countries, including the U.S.

China has also used Australian detector dog breeding and training techniques as a model to help them establish their own program. A contingent of 22 Australian detector dogs and puppies has been donated to China to be trained and used to detect narcotics.

As part of its program of international cooperation, Customs has developed a vision to establish a global gene bank for breeding future detector dogs using the Australian model.

For information on any Customs matters, contact the Customs Information and Support Centre on 1300 363 263, e-mail information@customs.gov.au or visit www.customs.gov.au

