



FEATURE

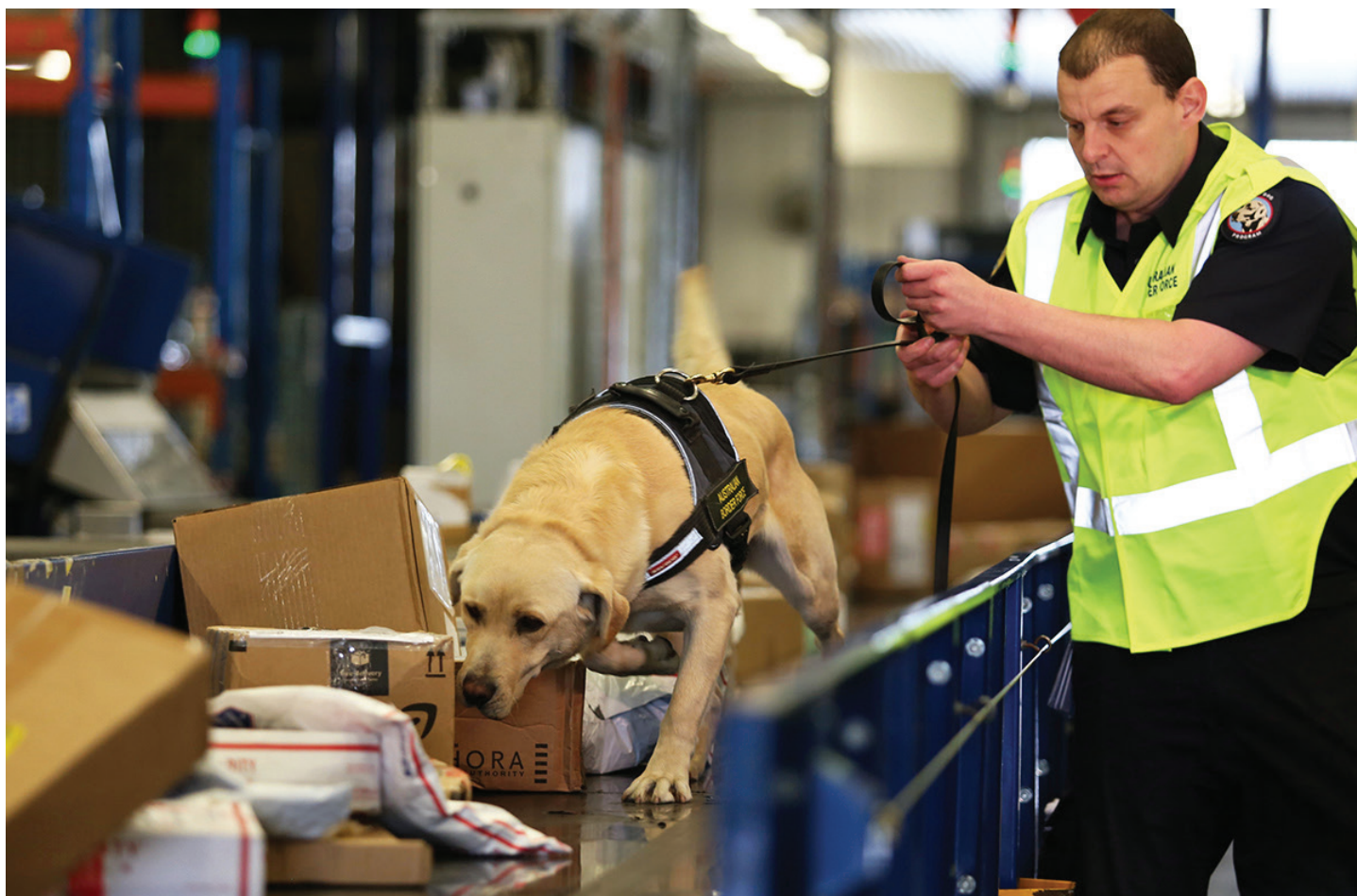


Australian Government

Department of Agriculture,  
Water and the Environment

# DETECTOR DOGS

The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment's biosecurity detector dogs play a vital role in helping to protect Australia from exotic pests and diseases. Detector dogs are used in conjunction with a number of other biosecurity strategies and detection technologies to help protect Australia's agricultural industries, environment, economy and human health. The department's detector dog teams are deployed at international airport terminals and mail facilities throughout Australia.



## Why is the role of detector dogs so important?

Since 1992, biosecurity detector dogs have actively contributed to Australia's frontline defence against damaging biosecurity risks.

Their role in helping protect Australia from exotic pests and disease is becoming increasingly important. The number of international passengers, cargo and mail items arriving in Australia is growing every year. This places increasing pressure on existing biosecurity strategies and detection technologies. Detector dogs are a fast, versatile and mobile detection technology that can screen across a range of environments. Therefore, detector dogs play an important role in strengthening our biosecurity systems in response to a growing biosecurity threat.



## FEATURE

### Where are the detector dogs from?

Suitable Labradors are sourced from the Australian Border Force (ABF) detector dog breeding program.

Detector dog training courses are conducted over an eight week period at our national training facility in Brisbane. Throughout the course novice detector dogs are trained to detect a variety of biosecurity risk material ranging from meat, fresh plant material, seeds and fresh fruit.

Novice detector dogs that are unsuitable for the role of a biosecurity detector dog are returned to the ABF for placement with other agencies.

Novice detector dogs that successfully complete the training then graduate and are deployed to their new region for a further two months of transitional training.

From just a pair of dogs in Sydney and Brisbane, to dogs deployed across the country, from Perth to Norfolk Island, the program has grown considerably.

Although the department initially used Beagles, Labradors now make up the entire canine workforce. Their extraordinary sense of smell and cooperative, gentle nature make them top-notch detectors.



### What are detector dogs trained to find?

Detector dogs are trained to find items that could bring pests or diseases into Australia, such as certain food, plant material and animal products.

On average, our detector dogs can be expected to find up to 9,000 biosecurity risk items during their working life. The three most common items the detector dogs find are meat, seeds and fruit.

The Travelling or returning to Australia page lists some of the items that dogs are trained to detect as they pose a biosecurity threat to Australia:

<https://www.agriculture.gov.au/travelling/travel-agent-resources/factsheet-travelling-returning>

We are continually looking to modernise our detector dog capabilities in order to strengthen our biosecurity system. The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment has worked with researchers at the University of New England to optimise the training of biosecurity detector dogs to detect the Brown Marmorated Stink Bug (BMSB). The BMSB is an

insect pest that is not found in Australia. It is important to protect Australia against BMSB because they are a nuisance pest and pose a high risk to agricultural crops.



These detections provide critical protection for our \$60 billion dollar agricultural industries and the health of our communities, economy, environment and unique wildlife.



Australian Government

Department of Agriculture,  
Water and the Environment



## Where are detector dogs deployed?

The detector dog program works side-by-side with other government departments and officials, including their canine compatriots from the Australian Border Force.

Our detector dogs operate in international airports and mail centres around Australia. Locations include Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, Adelaide and Norfolk Island. You can tell the difference by the bright red jackets worn by our biosecurity detector dogs.

At the international airport passenger terminal, our dogs may sit beside a passenger or baggage. This is called a 'passive detection'. A passive response is given a food reward.

Make sure you know what is in your bags as our Labs will sniff out everything from large food items to the smallest of seeds.

When screening objects in mail facilities the dogs will dig at the source of a target odour. This is called an 'active detection'. An active response is given a play reward.

## Why are detector dogs trained in-house?

Detector dog and handler training courses are now delivered by specialist biosecurity trainers within the department. These courses were previously conducted by external training providers. In-house training was implemented to develop a nationally consistent detector dog and handler capability by optimising the use of detector dogs teams across all operational scenarios.

Since the shift to in-house training, novice detector dogs are trained with experienced handlers, and novice handlers are trained with experienced detector dogs. The in-house detector dog handler training course runs for five weeks, as opposed to eight weeks with an external training provider.

The eight-week in-house detector dog training program allows the department to train all dogs as 'multipurpose' detector dogs. Multipurpose detector dogs are trained to work in different environments and deliver an appropriate response in the environment in which they are operating. When the dogs detect biosecurity risk material in an international passenger terminal they will have a 'passive response' and will sit beside a passenger or their baggage.

In-house training also allows the department to continually refine and modernise detector dog team capability by providing ongoing training. For example, detector dogs can be trained quickly to detect emerging biosecurity risk material such as BMSB.

We select our detector dogs from the Australian Border Force breeding program. The puppies are fostered by volunteer families until they are around 18 months old, when they are selected for work with the ABF, Australian Federal Police or with us, combatting biosecurity threats.

## Why use Labradors?

Labradors have practical purposes. They have an extraordinary sense of smell, are co-operative, gentle with people and possess extreme hunt, food and retrieve drives. Because of their strong retrieve drive, Labradors can be trained as multipurpose dogs.

Labradors are also large and agile, making it easy for them to screen larger items at airports and mail centres.



## FEATURE

### How long do the dogs work for and what happens when they retire?

We put the young dogs through a rigorous eight-week in-house training program. From there, the dogs have a working life of about six to eight years.

When they retire from their biosecurity role they are placed into loving homes, in many cases with one of their former handlers.



### A Brief History of Biosecurity Detector dogs

**1991:** Australia contracted a detector dog trainer from the US Department of Agriculture to help develop a pilot program in Australia.

**1992:** In February the first two detector dog teams became operational in Sydney and Brisbane.

**1995:** The department's detector dog operations were expanded by introducing active response dogs into international mail centres.

**2002:** After ten years of operation the program had expanded to 26 teams including six teams undertaking state government biosecurity work

**2009:** Labradors were introduced into airport and seaport operations. Until this time only beagles were used as passive response detector dogs in these environments.

**2011:** Based on the success of a pilot program conducted in Brisbane, conversion of passive response Labradors to multipurpose dogs commenced.

**2012:** The department celebrated twenty years of detector dogs as a part of a smart, integrated biosecurity system in Australia.

**2015:** First in-house training course delivered by the department for detector dog handlers.

**2016:** First in-house training course delivered by the department for detector dogs.

**2018:** The department trained its first detector dog to detect Brown Marmorated Stink Bug.

The Department continues to modernise and evolve the detector dog program as part of an integrated biosecurity system.

***'Detector Dogs' is reprinted with permission from © The Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment 2020***

**Reference: Website: <https://www.agriculture.gov.au/biosecurity/australia/detector-dogs>  
Watch the video: <https://youtu.be/WTKHAmAZrdM> Australian Detector Dogs**

Images: Page 11 - Detector dog in action at a mail centre. Page 12: Top- Detector dog with Biosecurity coat. Bottom (right) - The Brown Marmorated Stink Bug (BMSB). Page 13: Detection dogs have been trained to locate the endangered Alpine Stonefly. Detection dog 'Judd' at work with handler Shannyn at Falls Creek (Supplied by La Trobe University). Above: Detector Dog at work.