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Canine detective can sniff out answers



(AP) — Twelve hours after arriving in Oregon, Deacon was well on his way to solving his first case.

The 2-year-old canine detective put his nose to work and quickly picked up the scent of a liquid fuel used to start a fire in a house near Salem.

The black Labrador retriever did in minutes what arson investigators say can take human detectives hours, or even days.

"He'll put his nose on the exact spot of the accelerant used to start the fire," said Mark Merrill, a Springfield-based state police detective who investigates arson. "He's an incredible timesaver."

Deacon is Oregon's second dog — and one of only 42 dogs throughout the United States — specially trained to sniff out gasoline and other fuels used by arsonists.

The first Oregon dog, Charlotte, nicknamed Char, has been solving cases in Portland for about two years. Merrill said he and Deacon — who is now a member of Merrill's family — will work everywhere in Oregon

except Portland.

Other than kibble, Deacon isn't costing Oregon anything, state police authorities said. He was trained in March and early April by the Connecticut State Police at a cost of about \$8,000, paid for by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and by Aetna Insurance.

The Connecticut program buys dogs from the Guide Dog Foundation for the Blind in New York state. "The dogs we purchase are usually a little too high-strung to be guide dogs, but they're great arson dogs," said Phyllis Benton, an Aetna spokeswoman.

Benton said Aetna's interest in the eight-year-old program is largely financial. She said Aetna alone pays out \$45 million to \$50 million a year in settlements for suspicious, yet unsolved, fires.

By spreading the word about Deacon, Benton said she hopes would-be arsonists will be discouraged. If not, she said, they're likely to be caught.

Deacon performed perfectly when Merrill set four small cans on the floor, each filled with charred pieces of wood. One of the cans

also contained two drops of partially evaporated gasoline.

Merrill strapped a small black bag full of dry dog food on his waistband, a sign to Deacon that it was time to work. Deacon walked past two cans, then promptly sat down next to the third, stuck his nose inside and proudly wagged his tail.

"He's an amazing dog," Merrill said. "He'll go over stuff and under stuff. It's his job to find the accelerant, and he does."

Without dogs like Deacon, Merrill said arson investigators often have to send huge samples to the state crime lab in an effort to find fuels, a process he said is both time-consuming and expensive.

"We've had to send whole rooms to the crime labs before," Merrill said. "Deacon can put his nose on the exact spot, to where we can take a sample the size of a 50-cent piece."

"His nose is better suited than mine is," Merrill said. "He went through a two-story house in 15 minutes. It would have taken me all day."

Boeing looks into new, smaller jets

SEATTLE (AP) — The Boeing Co. announced Tuesday it is looking into the possibility of producing a new, smaller aircraft and has assigned an official from its commercial division to oversee the process.

Richard L. James, vice president of marketing for the division, has been asked "to explore the market feasibility and structure of a new small airplane program," said Ron Woodard, president of the Boeing Commercial Airplane Group.

As vice president — New Small Airplane Study, James will "continue our current studies that include Japanese industry participation as well as a team of Chinese observers."

James' appointment "underscores the importance Boeing places on the commercial jetliner market smaller than the 737 and our industrial relationship with Japan and China," Woodard said.

Boeing's workhorse 737 is the company's all-time best-seller and its smallest plane, with a capacity that ranges from 100 to 150 passengers.

Already exploring the possibility of a smaller plane are representatives from Japan Aircraft Industry, China National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corporation and Boeing's commercial division.

Under James, the effort will be re-evaluated during the third quarter and a decision made on "what follow-on efforts, if any, there will be," said Boeing spokeswoman Valerie Kusuda-Smick.

The analysis will focus on an 80- to 100-seat jet,

Kusuda-Smick said, though market demands could shift those numbers.

She noted the release Monday of Boeing's "Current Market Outlook" by James, which projected a high demand for smaller planes over the next several years due to federal airplane noise restrictions, aging fleets and growing overseas markets. James said these factors were expected to produce a need for 3,000 "new, smaller planes" jets over the next six years, and that Boeing intended to get a healthy share of that market.

Asked whether the Japanese or Chinese participants had prompted Boeing's decision to focus resources on the question, Kusuda-Smick said, "It's something they're interested in and we're interested in, so it's a joint study."

It's too soon to say whether Japan or China would be involved in production of such a plane, she said.

"At the point where we decide to proceed, then we will decide on the roles of every player," Kusuda-Smick said.

At this stage, she said, "We have agreed to examine the market need, the configuration, the technical requirements and economic viability of an airplane or family of airplanes in the 80- to 100-seat class."

A key objective of the analysis will be determining such a plane's "commonality with the next-generation 737," Boeing said in a release — a phrase that refers to cockpit similarities and the ease with which 737 — trained pilots could adapt to such an aircraft.

Cricket invasion causes problems for farmers

KENNEWICK, Wash. (AP) — The crickets are taking over.

Pasco farmer Walter Neff — whose rangeland 15 miles northeast of Pasco is infested with Mormon crickets — says the insects are so thick that after a drive through the infested area, cricket carcasses stick to Neff's pickup tires.

Some crawl into the wheel hubs of his Ford, as the shrill chirping of thousands of hoppers scrapes the summer air.

Their blackish-red bodies are as long as an adult's thumb, with the girth of a link sausage and an appetite to match its size.

The Mormon crickets were given their name by Mormon

settlers when their crops were nearly lost to the insects in the Salt Lake, Utah, area in 1848. Miraculously, hungry gulls gobbled up the crickets and saved the settlers from starvation.

Similar to the Salt Lake incident, this band of migrating crickets could spell dire economic problems to Franklin County farmers if they get out of hand, Neff said.

Neff hopes the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees the Juniper Dunes Wilderness Area near Neff's property, and the state can come up with the money necessary to kill the crickets before they begin mating — which isn't far away.

"I haven't had to do a Mormon cricket seminar since 1978," said David Keim, inspector with the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service in Spokane. "I have no idea why we haven't heard anything for 40 years and all of the sudden here they are again."

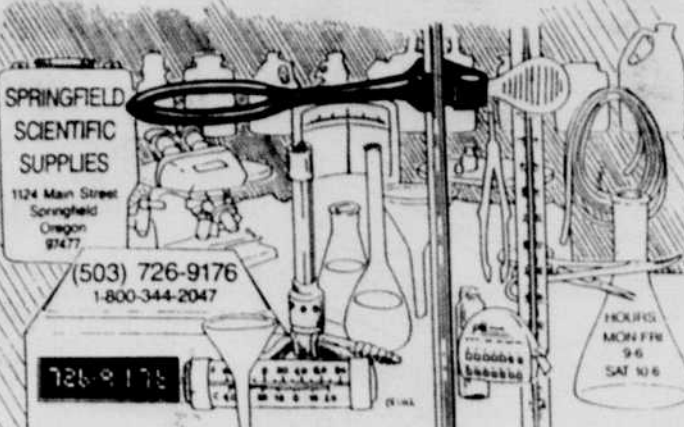
Legend has it that the non-flying critters introduced themselves to Mid-Columbia in the early 1930s.

They gobbled up as much as 200,000 acres in Franklin County before they perished around 1950. The infestation made Franklin County one of the nation's top 10 "hot spots" for the bugs, Keim said.

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