A Nose for Pest Control

Bed bug detector goes to work

By Sarah Reinecke

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Bo is a 1-year-old beagle that isn’t phased by the smell of freshly cooked bacon. He even ignores his bone when he’s on the clock, because it’s his job to sniff out bed bugs.

“He’s a diligent worker,” said his owner, Denise VanRoekel. She opened Dakota Bedbug Detection last month after buying Bo for $10,000 from a training facility in Kansas City. VanRoekel, an entomologist, said she’s been hearing about bed bug issues in Sioux Falls and throughout the area for months and she hopes her business can help give property managers, hotel owners and residents peace of mind and help eliminate infestations.

VanRoekel said bed bug detection dogs have been used for years on the coasts and in big cities, and the trend is working its way to the Midwest. Minnesota has a handful of the bed bug-sniffing dogs, but she hasn’t found any in South Dakota or North Dakota.

Bed bugs are one of South Dakota’s larger insect problems, said Jon Kieckhefer, a trained entomologist and Extension agronomy educator at South Dakota State University. It’s difficult to gauge how big of a problem it is because extensive records are not kept at state or local levels.

But LuAnn Ford, Public Health Manager for the Sioux Falls Health Department, tracks complaints regarding bed bugs in lodging facilities. So far this year, she has received eight bed bug complaints, and five have been substantiated.

Building services, which deals with insect infestations in rental properties, has received 20 to 30 complaints this year about bed bugs, Chief City Building Official Ron Bell said. “The number of calls has been increasing each year.”

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Local pest control workers regularly receive calls about bed bug infestations. “I would say three years ago, we didn’t hardly do a bed bug call a month said P.R. Olsen, owner of Olson’s Pest Technicians. “I would say we talk to a couple of people every day on bed bugs, whether it’s actual bed bugs or some type of bites.”

Dan Siefken, Executive Director of the South Dakota Multi-Housing Association, said he’s been searching for a local company with a bed bug detection dog for a while. He said five years ago, there were only one or two cases among rental properties, and now there are 30 to 50 annually. “With a bed bug sniffing dog, you’d be able to take the animal in and add a little more reassurance there are no infestations in the neighboring units,“ he said.

Kieckhefer said bed bug infestations have become more common in the past five years, and he expects it to get worse – especially in apartments, hotels and places such as college towns that tend to have more transient populations. He estimates that in Brookings, the majority of apartment buildings have at least one unit with bed bugs in them. “They can come in through a wide number of means, and short of avoiding contact with almost every other person, it’s hard to say you’d never get them,” he said, adding that a home’s cleanliness has no bearing on bed bugs.

Although bed bugs don’t pose much of a health issue, Kieckhefer said it’s a psychological issue for humans because the bugs feed off a human blood. He said from about 1950 to the last 1990’s, bed bugs were almost nonexistent, because DDT had done a good job of getting rid of them. Kieckhefer said dogs are good at detecting specifically where the bugs are by seeking out their distinct, defined smell.

To keep Bo proficient, VanRoekel does multiple training exercises with him daily. He has to find the bugs, and then he’s rewarded with dog food. She has vials of live bed bugs and Ziploc bags with live bed bugs wrapped in fabric similar to what would cover a couch or chair. She tells Bo It’s time to work, puts on his leash, straps the dog food around her waist, and the puppy puts his game face on. He eagerly sniffs under couch cushions and rugs and around coffee table décor, then pats, scratches and stares at VanRoekel when he’s found the bugs. It’s a repeat exercise. He finds the bugs, gets a handful of food, then moves on to find the next vial or bag.

“Beagles are scent hounds,” she said. “That’s what they’re bred to do. Their nose is over 1,000 times more sensitive than a human’s, and they don’t find things based on visual cues, they find it on scent.”VanRoekel hopes Bo can assist exterminators or be used for routine checks at hotels or apartments.

Exterminator Olson has worked with VanRoekel and Bo on a handful of calls so far. He said low infestations are difficult for the human eye to find. He said dogs also can assist in apartment complexes by checking neighboring units to see whether they need to be treated for bed bugs.