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Sniffing out drugs just a game for border dogs

Customs' canine unit uses special training method

By Bryon Wells

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YUMA — Like most dogs, Pyro loves to play.

Rollover. Play dead. Nevermind all that, this Labrador retriever prefers games like find-the-bale-of-marijuana-hidden-in-the-bumper-of-the-parked-car.

Pyro is one of an undisclosed number of drug- and human- detecting dogs employed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection at the nearby U.S. Port of Entry at San Luis.

The dogs are trained to sniff out hidden drugs and other contraband in vehicles crossing the border, and some can even sniff out human beings as they are smuggled into the country. Unlike other law enforcement canine programs, these dogs are trained on a "play reward" system. When a dog, like Nelo the German shepherd, finds a payload, it's play time — tug of war with a rolled up towel.

"It's all a game for them," said canine trainer Oscar Acuña. "He doesn't know it's weed, he only knows the towel. The only motivation for the dog to come to work is to play. Their paycheck is the towel."

According to the Customs and Border Protection Web site, there are more than 800 canine teams throughout the country, most of those along the U.S.-Mexican border. The Canine Enforcement Program is an integral part of the agency's counterterrorism and narcotics interdiction strategy.

A recent morning at the San Luis port of entry sees Pyro and Nelo in action.

The dogs are eager to get to work. As soon as the handler opens a gate on the canine unit patrol vehicle, Nelo is ready to go, practically pulling the human hand at the end of the leash as he searches cars directed through the secondary inspection point.

It is exactly that eagerness and energy that trainers look for when selecting dogs for the training center in Front Royal, Va. Not just any dog is selected. Dogs in the program are donated, found at the pound, procured through vendors, or bred in the agency's "puppy program," Acuña said.

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