



John Vandelloo and a Customs detector dog

PM's award recognises detector dog breeding centre

The Customs National Breeding and Development Centre for detector dogs was highly commended at the Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Public Sector Management.

Manager John Vandelloo accepted the honour on behalf of all connected with the Centre, saying the award should be shared among all who had assisted making the program a success.

"I'd like to thank not only the Customs officers and kennel hands who have worked at the Centre but also our hundreds of volunteer foster carers, other Customs areas which have lent their support over several years and our local and international partner agencies," he said.

From its humble beginnings nine years ago in the Victorian Drug Detector Dog Unit's dog-food storeroom, the Centre has achieved what no other agency in the world has - cost-effectively breeding dogs specifically for detection work.

Today the Centre is highly regarded internationally and is used as the model for several overseas breeding programs.

"It is very gratifying for the whole team to be recognised for the ground-breaking work that made the Customs breeding program a world leader," John said.

Customs CEO Lionel Woodward commissioned the Centre in 1996 after the Detector Dog Program and Melbourne University completed a four-year genetics research project.

The combination of science and Customs experience lead to such an impressive leap in detector dog breeding that both *New Scientist* and *Time* magazines published the findings.

Since those early days, the Centre has sourced additional bloodlines from suitable retrieving dogs, including those belonging to the Queen.

In addition to genetics and training, the Centre has pioneered a foster care program that provides the dogs' environmental and social training.

Careful selection and education, and support of these volunteers, are essential to the program's success.

"We have found that we need the right genes, the right environment and the right people involved from the dog's birth until they are fully trained," John said.

The Centre has produced around 350 labrador pups since 2001, each generation having a better rate of producing detector dogs than its predecessors.

The latest generations are being trained as multi-purpose response, firearms and explosives and chemical weapon precursor detection dogs.

More than 200 Customs-bred dogs have been provided to other Australian agencies for community protection, including all Federal and State police services, Defence, Quarantine, NSW fire service and various State corrections institutions.

More than 100 pups have been sent to six countries. The largest contingent is 60 to the USA that founded three breeding colonies to support Federal US agency detector dog needs.