Multipurpose labrador detector dogs join front line

Multipurpose labrador detector dogs, trained especially for both passive and active quarantine risk screening operations, are being introduced at Australia's international airports, mail centres and cargo facilities.

Phasing in the larger and more versatile labradors signals a move away from the highly recognisable and iconic beagles, which have been working diligently in airports around the country since 1992.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry carried out a successful pilot program in Brisbane in 2010 of training and deploying multipurpose dogs to carry out specific responses to target material in all passenger, mail and cargo environments.

Active responses by detector dogs are essential for screening in mail centres and cargo facilities, allowing the dogs to quickly and accurately identify target material among many packages, often on a moving conveyor belt. Passive responses are needed for airports and cruise vessel passenger terminals, where dogs are trained to sit beside a passenger or baggage containing detector dog target material.

Matt Holloway, the National Program Manager for the Mail and Detector Dog Program, said there were 22 passive Labradors working in airports around the country with a further 10 currently in training. All these dogs have the capacity to be converted to multipurpose dogs.

"Because the labrador breed generally possesses both a strong food drive and a strong retrieve drive we are able to exploit both drives to maintain environmentally specific responses," Mr Holloway said. "This characteristic makes them highly suitable as multipurpose dogs".

"Multipurpose detector dogs will deliver a greater operational return through exploiting the mobility, flexibility and adaptability of the labrador breed," he said.

Two multipurpose labradors are already working in Brisbane and there are plans to introduce two more before the end of the year, in addition to a broader rollout in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.