



Terriers track DeKalb airport pests

By Nichole Hacha-Thomas nthomas@kpcnews.net
Wednesday, December 07, 2011, 12:00am

AUBURN — Officials at the DeKalb County Airport got a creative recently when they wanted to eradicate groundhogs from the property.

To eliminate the rodents, the airport called in the dogs — literally.

Airport manager Russ Couchman said he contacted a northeastern Indiana kennel whose owners breed Jack Russell terriers as hunting dogs. The friends brought several certified terriers to the airport Nov. 26 and put the dogs to work.

“These little Jack Russell terriers are bred and designed for this,” Couchman said. “You really have to see it to believe it.”

Couchman and the breeders spent four hours walking the airport grounds searching for groundhog burrows. Each time the crew found a hole, Couchman said, a Jack Russell was lowered into the burrow and allowed to sniff out the varmint.

Once a groundhog — or other underground animal — was found, the dog would corner it and begin to howl to alert the searchers above. The terrier’s location was found using the tracking device, and then the digging began.

“Then crew just starts digging down,” Couchman said. “They dig out the dog, and out comes whatever it was chasing.”

Dogs can be located as far as 10 feet below the ground, although Couchman said none of the terriers was more than 2 feet down.

Couchman said the amount of time the Jack Russells took to search each burrow was different, mainly due to the long, intricate nature of the groundhog system of tunnels. The longest search took nearly 30 minutes.

Groundhog eradication has been needed since the airport erected its fence to keep out foxes, coyotes and other big animals. A new problem was born, as the groundhog population exploded, Couchman said.

Groundhogs like to chew everything, which can be dangerous for the airport and its miles and miles of unprotected power lines. Those same lines power the instrument landing system, runway lights and other essential airport systems.

“It’s a pretty hefty system, and it would be pretty expensive to have to find where a problem is



A Jack Russell terrier is located by searchers after sniffing out an opossum on the grounds of the DeKalb County Airport. The dogs are bred to hunt and eradicate groundhogs and other underground vermin by being lowered into burrows and dug out once a pest is found. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED



A Jack Russell terrier looks on as another is released into a groundhog burrow. While no groundhogs were found, the terriers located three opossums living underneath the airport. Airport manager Russ Couchman said the opossums were allowed to stay. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

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and fix it," Couchman said.

No groundhogs were found during the expedition, but Couchman said three opossums were located. One opossum was mangled by a terrier, but the other two were allowed to stay in their habitat. Couchman said opossums are the least of the airport's worries. If groundhogs had been found, they would have been eliminated, since relocation is not a viable option, he said.

Couchman said the airport will continue to monitor the groundhog situation. He said he'd like to use the Jack Russells again, since the execution was great.

"It is so amazing that these dogs can do that," Couchman said. "You think they are just these cute, little lap-dogs, but no. They are so neat."

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