On any given morning, Bella, the golden lab can be found nosing around Contra Costa County. Be it on a conveyor belt at FedEx in Concord or plowing through a pile of boxes at UPS in Richmond, Bella is always up for the task. Her job requires putting her best foot (nose) forward to sniff out packages sent through the mail containing fruits, vegetables and plant materials coming into California without labels identifying the contents. She will work tirelessly for four to five hours, motivated entirely by her love for dog biscuits and a willingness to please.

Bella and inspector Cecilie Siegel make up one of three dog-detector-teams located in Contra Costa and San Bernardino counties. In the short period that Bella has worked in this three-year pilot program, she has alerted her handler to dozens of boxes of contraband that could play host to invasive pests that threaten California’s $31.4 billion agricultural industry. Started by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the detector-dog program took root at the Los Angeles International Airport in 1984. Now, more than 65 dog teams are working throughout the country at 21 airports and delivery services. Although Bella is specifically trained to sniff out plants and produce, many other canines are used for drugs, explosives, meat and live-animal detection. These dogs go through extensive training for eight to 10 weeks in Orlando, Florida, to develop their instincts to seek out and expose illegal cargo.

Bella’s personality makes her a perfect fit for the job. The No. 1 desirable trait for a sniff dog is to have a strong food drive, followed closely by a desire to please. The combination of love for food and trainer is a formula for success in the dog-training business. Although Bella is well loved and cared for, she does not live in the home of her trainer. In Bella’s case, she is kept in her trainer’s backyard, where she is fed a special diet of premium dog food; never human food. In caring for detector dogs, it is important to limit their exposure to various odors commonly found inside homes. This is purposely done so the dog does not become desensitized to odors and aromas that they are trained to alert to, such as plants and produce.

For five years, the California Department of Food and Agriculture used dog teams at airports, post offices and mail services throughout the state. In 2001, due to financial limitations, the program was dropped. However, there was never any doubt about the important role these dogs played in California’s battle to keep invasive pests at bay. Bella could be an influential spark to re-kindled a great idea. With continued success of the federally funded program in Contra Costa and San Bernardino counties, it will hopefully be possible for additional detector dog teams in California.