

Arson Dogs

For more than 12,000 years, dogs have worked alongside humans. They have herded our livestock, hunted with us, and pulled us across otherwise impassable frozen expanses. Most modern dogs are companions, of course, but those who do work have ever more extraordinary job descriptions. Accelerant-detection is one example. Arson dogs work with fire investigative units to sniff out minuscule amounts of anything from lamp oil to lighter fluid (they can detect more than 60 different ignitable petroleum-based hydrocarbons) in scenes flooded with water or covered in snow or mud. They use their 200 million scent receptors (compared to our 5 million) to help investigators accurately assess the flammable products present at a fire scene and increase the chances of collecting a positive sample.

This can help rule arson in—or out. With billions of dollars in property and hundreds of lives lost every year as a result of intentionally set fires, arson dogs can play an important role in bringing arsonists to justice.

What makes a good arson dog? At the top of the list is a high level of energy. Dogs that might be considered the problem child in other settings are often prime candidates—Guide dog training “dropouts,” for example. Other key characteristics are curiosity, high trainability, an excellent nose, and an easygoing demeanor.