

*in their*  
**Debt**

By Jen Reeder

# FIRE DOG

Jo Jo alerts during an outdoor training session.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HEATHER PAUL

## Jo Jo

Lab highlights invaluable work of dogs who detect arson and help collar criminals.

**F**or the past three years, a black Lab named Jo Jo has deployed to many complicated fire scenes. Alongside her handler, Dawn Tollis, inspector, investigator, and K-9 handler for Adams County Fire Rescue in Colorado, Jo Jo has sniffed burned buildings, charred cars, and wildfire-scorched terrain for arson evidence – ignitable fuels like gasoline and diesel.

Sometimes the call comes at two a.m. Jo Jo always relishes the chance to work, even when it involves wading through six inches of sooty water. She can detect traces of flammable liquid even two weeks after a fire, and is able to search a 1,000-square-foot home in just five minutes.

The Lab alerts so quickly on evidence that's impossible for humans to see that she minimizes the amount of time

firefighters, detectives, and other first responders must spend in a dangerous, toxic environment.

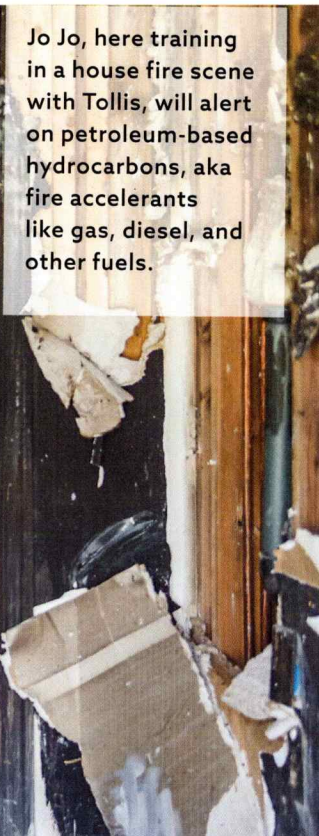
"I kid you not: I still get chills when she alerts," Tollis said. "It's an amazing thing."

But at one fire scene, her greatest contribution may have been just being a Lab. A homeowner was so agitated that she couldn't speak to investigators about what she had witnessed. Then Jo Jo went over and lay down beside the woman, who started petting her.

"Petting Jo Jo brought her anxiety down to a level where she could tell us what she remembered," Tollis recalled. "We sniffed the house after the fire. But the most impressive thing I think Jo Jo did that day was lend some comfort to someone who had just lost her home."

To partner with Jo Jo, in April of 2021 Tollis traveled to Maine, where she spent a month training with other Labs and handlers. She loved seeing the different ways dogs alert when they find accelerants. While Jo Jo sits or lies down, one little Lab danced back and forth on her front paws for a successful find. Many others started drooling.





Jo Jo, here training in a house fire scene with Tollis, will alert on petroleum-based hydrocarbons, aka fire accelerants like gas, diesel, and other fuels.

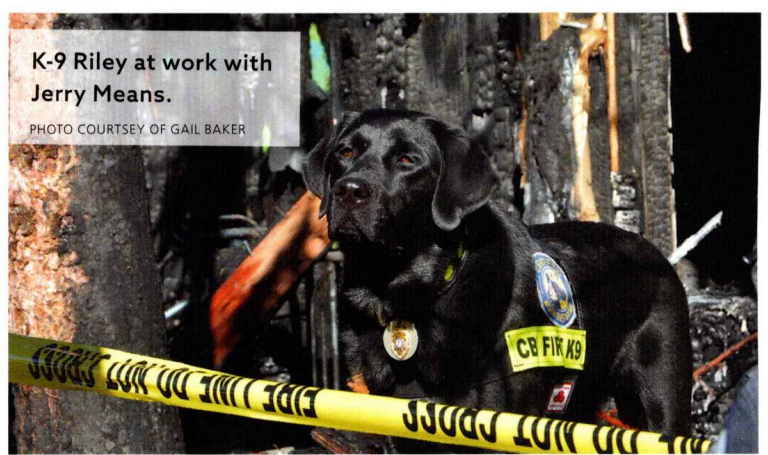


Jo Jo ready for work.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF HEATHER PAUL

# STATE FARM'S STATEMENT ON DISCONTINUING ITS ARSON DOG PROGRAM

Kim Kaufman, who works in Corporate Communications at State Farm, shared the following in response to *Just Labs* magazine's request for comment:

"State Farm is proud to have provided 30 years of financial support for the acquisition and training of more than 450 arson dog teams in 46 states, three Canadian provinces, and the District of Columbia. Last fall, as we evaluated our business practices and funding, we decided not to renew the State Farm Arson Dog Program beyond the current agreement which ends Dec. 31, 2024. We wanted to give the handlers and others connected to the program ample time to seek funding elsewhere. We are grateful for the important work they do."



K-9 Riley at work with Jerry Means.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF GAIL BAKER

That's because arson dogs – also called fire dogs or ignitable liquid detection dogs – work for food rewards. These Labs only eat out of the hands of their handlers (never a bowl), and only for a successful find.

So handlers like Tollis have to train with their dogs each morning and evening even on off-duty days. On laundry day, Tollis will place a couple of drops of gasoline on a dirty sock and hide it in a pile of clothing for Jo Jo to find. She trains on a "daisy wheel" with eight arms with cans on each end. One can hides gas, while the others contain different items the team might find on a fire scene.

"We get to play pyro, and we burn typical materials that would be found here in Colorado: building materials, studs, drywall, roofing, flooring, carpet, different kinds of plastics," Tollis explained. "Then we spin the wheel and it's





PHOTO COURTESY OF HEATHER PAUL

**Jo Jo loves working and becomes focused when she hears her handler, Dawn Tollis, say it's time to work and click a food pouch around her waist. "She goes from being a normal, everyday dog to being a working dog. You can almost see her personality change the second she hears that click."**

just like *Wheel of Fortune*. The dog has to walk around the wheel and find the can that has the gasoline in it."

That training pays off whenever Jo Jo alerts and discovers a fire was started by arson, saving insurance companies from fraudulent claims and putting criminals behind bars. In every instance when Jo Jo has detected evidence, the arsonist has pled guilty.

"Jo Jo still surprises me with her capabilities," Tollis said. "It's just amazing what she can do."

**J**erry Means, Adams County Chief Fire Investigator, co-founder and executive director of the nonprofit International Fire Dogs, agrees. He's been a handler for three fire dogs – black Labs named Erin, Sadie, and Riley – and seen other teams in action, including Tollis and Jo Jo.

"Dawn is a fabulous fire investigator, and Jo Jo is a jewel," he said. "She's just such a sweet, hardworking little pup." (Case in point: During a phone interview for this article, Tollis had to spell out "W-O-R-K" because Jo Jo gets so excited when she hears it's time to "work.")

Means said Labs excel as ignitable liquid detection dogs because of their powerful noses, friendly demeanor, athletic ability, and comfort with water.

"The Labrador retriever by design is an agile dog that gets around a fire scene very well that's collapsed and has boards every which way," he noted. "And they tolerate the water from the fire suppression very well. They're used to walking in water and being around water."

Without fire dogs, investigators wouldn't know where to look for proof of arson. The probe used to collect evidence samples is only about an inch in diameter, so it would take an impossibly long time to cover an entire house without a Lab.

"You can't just go in and identify those flammable liquids in a fire scene. Everything's black, everything's been doused with water. But these dogs have no issue at all going in and finding trace amounts of ignitable liquids that they've been trained to identify," he said.

The Labs also weave through crowds sniffing for accelerants on the clothing of onlookers, which frequently include the person who intentionally started the fire.

"I could tell you story after story of homicides that we've had where the dog has been instrumental in surveying the person's clothing and alerting on it," Means said. "We send it to the laboratory to have it validated, and that's all great physical evidence in court that allows us to successfully prosecute somebody who started a fire who either covered a crime or killed somebody."

Means is so passionate about the importance of arson dogs that he co-founded the nonprofit International Fire Dogs in 2024 in response to State Farm shuttering its 30-year State Farm Arson Dog Program (see sidebar), which funded arson dog training, placement, and annual recertification.

International Fire Dogs, which is run by volunteers, has raised enough money to cover the recertification costs for more than 100 arson dogs in North America in 2025, but desperately needs a major donor to underwrite the \$25,000 it takes to train and place *each* arson dog – or there won't be any new arson dogs for fire departments to help safeguard communities, according to Means.

"Maybe somebody will read this who has a love for Labradors and a love for the fire service and save this program," he said.

In the meantime, Tollis and Jo Jo will continue working to protect communities in Colorado for as long as they can. "It's quite an adventure," Tollis said. "It'll be interesting to see what the future holds for us." 🐾

To donate, offer advice, or learn more about International Fire Dogs, visit: [www.internationalfd.org](http://www.internationalfd.org).



Award-winning journalist **JEN REEDER** is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America. She became a self-proclaimed "crazy dog lady" after she and her husband adopted a lovable Lab mix named Rio. Visit her online at [www.JenReeder.com](http://www.JenReeder.com).