CONTACT: Mark Hodges/Ray Moore
           (404) 894-3405

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TO DETECT AGRICULTURAL CONTRABAND   For Immediate Release

ATLANTA, GA....Within the next decade, U.S. Customs officials may find

contraband agricultural products in international travelers' luggage with a

device similar to a metal detector.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has contracted with Georgia Tech's

Engineering Experiment Station to study electromagnetic radiation as a means

of scanning closed baggage in air terminals for illegally-imported meats,

fruits and vegetables.

Despite a ban on the importation of perishable goods from most foreign

countries, Customs agents made around 50,000 seizures of contraband items

last year.

"USDA is concerned about the possibility of contamination of our

agriculture," says Ronald Seaman, the Georgia Tech engineer heading up the

research project. "We hope to find a way to inspect luggage more quickly

and efficiently than has been done in the past."

Georgia Tech researchers believe that meats and fruits in baggage

can be detected with radar-like devices because the electrical makeup of

these items is much different than that of suitcases and clothing.

These differences derive from the high water content of agricultural

products. But this advantage may prove to be a limitation. The Georgia

Tech research team must find a way to differentiate electromagnetically be-

tween perishable goods and bottles of liquid -- and between dried fruits,

(more)

flowers and other items of baggage.

"No one's ever designed one of these systems for agricultural products," says Seaman. "If we think it can be done, we'll make a prototype unit for further testing."

The Georgia Tech study isn't the only one commissioned by USDA to find answers to the agricultural contraband problem. USDA also is funding projects at other research institutions to explore the potential of X-rays, electronic sniffers and a special kind of geiger counter to detect these goods in travelers' bags.

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