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Olympic bidder Sapporo experiences erratic snowfall



SNOW SCULPTURES. A tourist wearing a mask walks past a snow sculpture during the 71st Sapporo Snow Festival last month at Odori Park in Sapporo, Japan. Held in the capital city of Hokkaido, the snow festival has been one of the largest winter celebrations in Japan. It showcases more than 200 ice and snow sculptures for the hundreds of thousands of daily visitors. Odori Park is scheduled to serve as the start and finish points for the marathon and race walk events at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics this summer. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

By **Jae C. Hong**
The Associated Press

SAPPORO, Japan — After two months of almost no snow, Japan's northern city of Sapporo was overwhelmed with the white stuff.

About 14 inches of snow fell in just six hours following the nearly barren months of December and January.

The snowfall was good news for tourism, for the “look” of the annual Sapporo Snow Festival, and for organizers who hope to bring the 2030 Winter Olympics to the city. Sapporo hosted the Winter Olympics back in 1972.

But the lack of snow — and then an abundance of it — is also a sign that the local climate is changing, which has researchers in the area watching the weather very closely.

“We often have this kind of event,” Dr. Tomonori Sato, an associate professor at Hokkaido University, told The Associated Press. “However, the magnitude was abnormal. This maybe is because of warming temperatures.”

Sato predicts that Hokkaido, the island where Sapporo is located, will have more warming winters, which has to be a worry for an area that is officially bidding for the Winter Olympics.

According to Sato, January's average daily minimum temperature in Sapporo has been continually rising: almost 16.2° Fahrenheit (9° Celsius) over the course of a century based on his analysis.

“It has shifted dramatically,” Sato said.

Sato said there will be snow if Sapporo gets the Winter Olympics. But he couldn't guarantee much snow 80 years

from now.

“Even if Sapporo gets snow, it will melt right away,” Sato said. “At the end of this century, it will be difficult [to] maintain the snow festival.”

In fact, it was difficult to keep the snow festival going this year.

Trucks had to bring in snow from everywhere to keep the festival going, an event that attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists. The city's 40-year-old ski marathon event was cancelled due to a lack of snow.

Paul Sheehan, an Australian who has been coming to Japan for several years to build snow sculptures, noticed the difference this time in Sapporo's Odori Park.

“Previous years, we've had three, four meters of snow,” he said. “Where we are standing now, last year we were a meter higher. We are now standing one meter lower.”

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