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El Nino may hurt Vancouver Olympics

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SEATTLE — Beware Olympic planners. El Nino lurks.

Forecasters with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said Thursday the weather phenomenon is building in the Pacific Ocean. If it holds as expected, history shows El Nino will bring drier and warmer than normal weather to our region.

University of Washington Research Meteorologist Nick Bond says you "can see a large band of water that's one degree Celsius warmer than normal at this time of year." The band is predicted to last until February or March and through the time slated for Vancouver's Olympic Games.

"They should be taking this into account," said Bond.

KING 5 Meteorologist Rich Marriott says during a typical El Nino winter, the storm systems from the Pacific will split as they approach the West Coast and head north to Alaska and south to central and southern California.

As a result, that normally leaves Washington, Oregon and British Columbia with warmer temperatures and lower snowfall.

Vancouver's Olympic Organizing Committee (VANOC) says it has developed plans to deal with El Nino.

"We have been working with Environment Canada as a key partner in our weather planning, which includes having Environment Canada staff in our offices," said the Committee's Executive Vice President for Sports and Games Operations Cathy Priestner Allinger said in a statement. "As weather planning is always a high priority for a Winter Games, we consider a number of different weather scenarios in our contingency planning to ensure that we are prepared to successfully stage the Games."

Cypress Mountain, at 3,000 feet above sea level, is of particular concern. A World Cup snowboard race was cancelled there in February 2008 because of warm weather and poor conditions.

VANOC says it has invested in snowmaking machines and snow movers and will stockpile snow if need be. It wouldn't say how much money was invested in the backup plan.

El Nino forecasts are not an exact science. In 2006, when the phenomenon existed in the Pacific, the Puget Sound area suffered through the Hanukkah Eve storm, but wasn't particularly dry. The Whistler resort also reported more snow than normal.

But in 2004, another El Nino year, local ski resorts were very dry and didn't open until late in the season and

Whistler had one of its most challenging years on record.

El Nino also presents potential problems for the Northwest fishing industry. NOAA says warmer oceans can lead to a reduction in the seafood catch off the West Coast, and fewer fish can also impact food sources for several types of birds and marine mammals.

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