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## Woe, Canada! Olympic problems and missteps pile up

By Jack Broom  
Seattle Times staff reporter

The cancellation of 20,000 more tickets to events at Cypress Mountain, on top of myriad other woes, is putting Vancouver Olympics organizers increasingly on the defensive as they attempt to salvage the world's impressions of the Games taking place here.

In an hourlong Tuesday briefing touching on everything from transportation snafus to equipment failures to weather woes to the prison-camp look of the Olympic cauldron display, some reporters demanded to know if this might be the worst start ever to an Olympic Games.

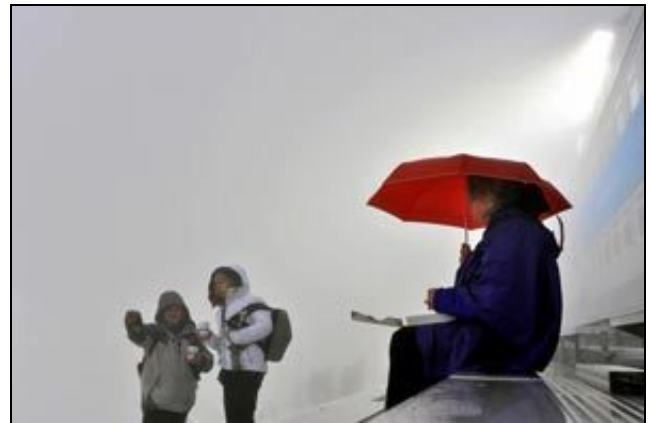
Clearly concerned about the way these Olympics are being portrayed internationally, Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) spokeswoman Renee Smith-Valade said, "We've seen some press from Britain that we have looked at and wondered which city the reporter is reporting from. It doesn't feel like it's here."

Mark Adams, spokesman for the International Olympic Committee (IOC), praised VANOC's "quick action" to deal with problems and insisted athletes and fans are still having, for the most part, a very positive experience.



PAUL CHIASSON / AP

The caged torch: Spectators stand on concrete barriers to take photos Sunday of the Olympic cauldron on the Vancouver waterfront. Heavily criticized for the blocked views, the Vancouver Organizing Committee plans to announce changes Wednesday.



BELA SZANDELSZKY / AP

The fog and I: Stephanie Walker sits Tuesday in the grandstand before the women's snowboardcross on Cypress Mountain. Heavy fog contributed to a two-hour delay in the event.

By far the biggest pall was cast even before the Games opened, with the Friday death at Whistler of Georgian luge racer Nodar Kumaritashvili triggering controversy about safety of the track.

And since then, the problems and gaffes just seem to keep coming.

Friday evening, as the world watched on television, one of four huge pillars intended to light the caldron at the Opening Ceremony failed to rise.

At the beginning of this week, the ice-resurfacing equipment broke down two days in a row at the Richmond Olympic Oval, delaying speedskating events by up to an hour. VANOC is bringing in a replacement from Calgary, but reporters asked why a backup wasn't closer at hand.

Tuesday, the men's super-combined, in the mountains at Whistler, was postponed because of an overnight snowstorm. That's just the latest weather delay: Earlier, several events and practices had to be rescheduled because of fog, snow or rain.

Smith-Valade said many of the difficulties have been caused by the warmest winter weather on record, which VANOC could not have foreseen. "It's weather and it is what it is and we deal with it," she said.

### **Not just weather**

But the problems at Cypress Mountain have been only partly due to weather. Buses have broken down or gotten lost on the way up, with fans waiting for hours in the cold and darkness to return to Vancouver, and spectators, who are barred from bringing their own food and drink, waiting for more than an hour just for a warm beverage.

VANOC officials said it would have been impossible to have additional customer-service facilities at the relatively small site, a response that fueled criticism of Cypress Mountain's selection as a venue.

The additional Cypress cancellations announced Tuesday — now totaling 28,000 tickets — stemmed from the closure, for all remaining events, of the standing-room area for snowboard and freestyle skiing events.



JOHN LOK / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Where's the Zamboni?: Wopke de Vegt, speedskating coach from the Netherlands, checks the ice Monday at the Richmond Olympic Oval, where resurfacing equipment broke down two days in a row.



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES

That viewing area, which accommodated about 4,000 fans, was built by packing tons of snow on top of bales of straw, but persistent rains have washed away much of the snow, said Caley Denton, VANOC's vice president for ticketing.

Snowboarding fans make the best of a two-hour delay Tuesday in the women's snowboardcross event at Cypress Mountain. Heavy fog was one of the factors for the delay.

As a result, the remaining snow cover is so thin, people walking across it have slipped up to their knees or higher in gaps between the straw bales. Denton said crews considered ways to reinforce the area, but "at the end of the day, we just came to the conclusion that it's just too unstable."

VANOC will refund the purchase price of the tickets, \$50 to \$65 apiece, but only to the original buyer. Anyone who bought tickets at an inflated price on the secondary market is stuck.

The decision does not affect grandstand seating at Cypress or standing-room tickets for freestyle aerials competition, to be held in a separate stadium at Cypress.

Denton said the canceled tickets represent a loss of \$1.5 million in ticket revenue. That's a tiny part of VANOC's \$260 million in ticket revenue.

But the public-relations damage may be more significant.

Sunday, some fans didn't get word of the closure until they had traveled to the site.

Adams said weather-related changes to events are unfortunate but not unprecedented. He said nearly 60,000 tickets to the Nagano, Japan, Olympics in 1998 were canceled because of bad weather.

He brushed aside a suggestion at the briefing that the IOC may have erred in siting the Winter Olympics in an area with such a moderate climate. He noted that colder, more typical weather is expected for the next week.

Criticism of these Games has been especially pointed in London, site of the next Summer Olympics.

"London 2012 can't be worse than the Vancouver Games this winter" headlined The Times of London.

Even the display of the Olympic caldron, on an industrial-looking space on the Vancouver waterfront, has been a target of widespread criticism.

Throngs line up for blocks to get a view of the flaming sculpture, only to end up photographing it through a chain-link fence. Writer Michael Smyth, in a Tuesday column in The Province, said, "The caldron is a symbol of the human spirit, so why keep it locked up like a caged animal?"

VANOC is taking that criticism to heart, Smith-Valade said, and will reconfigure the display to give passers-by a better view. Details of the display, which will include a viewing platform, will be announced Wednesday, she said.

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*Material from The Associated Press was included in this report.*

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