

Scientists: Clock ticking for glaciers in the Alps



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Marc Olefs and Andrea Fischer, researchers from Innsbruck University, check a field covered with white polyethylene against the backdrop of jagged peaks, at Eisgrat skiing station in Austria.

By **WILLIAM J. KOLE**
The Associated Press

VIENNA, Austria — Glaciers will all but disappear from the Alps by 2050, scientists warned yesterday, basing their bleak outlook on mounting evidence of slow but steady melting of the continental ice sheets.

In western Austria's Alpine province of Tyrol, glaciers have been shrinking by about 3 percent a year, meaning their mass decreases annually by roughly 3 feet, said Roland Psenner, of the University of Innsbruck's Institute for Ecology.

And 2050 is a conservative estimate, he said: If they keep melting at that rate, most glaciers could vanish by 2037.

Experts at a regional conference on the Alps, held annually in the mountain resort of Alpbach, stopped short of blaming global warming. But they called for a review of preventive mea-

asures to protect people living in valleys at risk of dangerous flooding.

Runoff from melting glaciers caused severe flooding that devastated parts of Switzerland in the summer of 2005.

Glacial melting is a global problem, according to the Zurich-based World Glacier Monitoring Service, which keeps tabs on 30 ice sheets in nine mountain ranges worldwide and says their average mass is steadily eroding.

Glaciers are the planet's largest source of fresh water after polar ice, which scientists say also is melting to 100-year lows. In Europe, they're also hugely popular with skiers and snowboarders seeking year-round thrills and help anchor a multimillion-dollar tourist industry.

In 2005, glacier thickness decreased by an average of 23½ inches, and in 2004 by an average of 27½ inches.