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SPECIAL REPORT

# Scientists fear onset of Dust Bowl

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**W**ASHINGTON — The nation's Midwestern breadbasket is overdue for another 1930s-style Dust Bowl, and while it's too early to tell for sure, the parched summer of 1998 may have marked the start of one, government weather researchers said Tuesday.

And we could be getting off easy with a Dust Bowl.

A much larger drought could be on the way within the next century or so, researchers say. Using tree rings, submerged tree trunks, archaeological finds, lake sediments and sand dunes, they found that twice in the last 700 years "megadroughts" have struck the area. They have lasted two to four decades instead of years.

The megadroughts were just one element of a complex cycle of droughts discovered by researchers from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

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Administration. They also found that major Dust Bowl droughts generally hit twice a century and that smaller two-year droughts strike every 20 years or so.

"There's this 20-year periodicity of drought, we're not sure what that is due to, but it seems to be fairly regular," said Connie Woodhouse, a University of Colorado research scientist working at NOAA's National Geophysical Data Center. "So if that's true, we should be expecting another drought, maybe a big drought in the next two years."

This summer's dramatic dry spell along the southern plains and mid-Atlantic states — severe in parts of Texas and Florida — could be the limited beginning of such a drought, she said. But Woodhouse and her colleague, Jonathan Overpeck, head of paleoclimatology for NOAA, said it was still too early to tell.

Other researchers are even more cautious.

Vern Kousky, a NOAA climatologist who monitors El Niño and La Niña warmings and coolings of the central Pacific and is not part of the drought research team, said, "I don't see us in the midst of a great drought right now." But, he said dry conditions in the southern plains will continue through the crucial winter months and the spring and summer growing seasons because of the La Niña weather phenomenon, in which cooler than normal water temperatures in the central Pacific disrupt normal precipitation patterns.

Droughts are expensive. The \$39 billion expense of the one- to two-year drought in 1988-89 was a bigger blow to the U.S. economy than the devastation of Hurricane Andrew, said NOAA official Roger Pulwarty, who joined Woodhouse and Overpeck at a Tuesday news conference in Washington. The current drought already has caused about \$7 billion in damage, NOAA estimates.

"The droughts that we've had in this century are relatively minor in perspective of the last 2,000 years," Overpeck said. He said the 16th-century megadrought, which was heavy in the Great Plains and the West Coast, lasted 20 to 30 years, he said.