

Calif. has lengthy history of dry periods

By Paul Rogers, San Jose Mercury News

California's current drought is being billed as the driest period in the state's recorded rainfall history. But scientists who study the West's long-term climate patterns say the state has been parched for much longer stretches before that 163-year historical period began.

And they worry that the "megadroughts" typical of California's earlier history could come again.

Through studies of tree rings, sediment and other natural evidence, researchers have documented multiple droughts in California that lasted 10 or 20 years in a row during the past 1,000 years – compared to the mere three-year duration of the current dry spell. The two most severe megadroughts make the Dust Bowl of the 1930s look tame: a 240-year-long drought that started in 850 and, 50 years after the conclusion of that one, another that stretched at least 180 years.

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