

ETH Board plans leading institute for environment and sustainability

The ETH Board intends to create a new institute in the area of the environment and sustainability. It thus aims to focus research in the ETH Domain on urgent social questions such as climate change and the sustainable use of resources in a more targeted way. In this context, the two research institutes WSL and Eawag will be united for this purpose in the medium term. The objective of the new institute is to use its leading international research to find solutions for a sustainable future for society, and to develop Switzerland further as a leading research centre for the environment and sustainability.

Zurich/Bern, 25 October 2019 – The ETH Board is tasked with gearing teaching, research, and knowledge and technology transfer in the ETH Domain to the challenges facing society. Together with the presidents of the two Federal Institutes of Technology and the directors of the four research institutes, the ETH Board will adjust the structure and strategic orientation of the institutions of the ETH Domain to the long-term future. One of the most pressing problems is climate change and its social and economic impact. This is where the ETH Domain can make a valuable contribution, because new technologies will play a crucial role in the development of sustainable solutions.

Forward-looking orientation of the structure of the ETH Domain

On the basis of its Strategic Plans of the past few years, the ETH Board had decided to review the structure of the ETH Domain in a forward-looking way with reference to its four strategic areas of focus: Personalised Health, Data Sciences, Advanced Manufacturing and Environment & Energy. The existing thematic competencies in the ETH Domain are thus to be more clearly represented and systematically consolidated, and new initiatives by the institutions promoted in a coordinated manner. As a first step, the ETH Board is focusing on the area of environment and energy. WSL and Eawag are to be combined in order to strengthen teaching, research and knowledge and technology transfer in the area of environment and sustainability. A new institute is therefore being set up that will attract researchers from other institutions as well as a variety of partners. This decision, which was taken at the end of September 2019, followed various discussions in the ETH Board over a period of several years, in which the presidents of the two Federal Institutes of Technology and the directors of the four research institutes were regularly involved.

WSL and Eawag to be combined into an institute for environment and sustainability

In the medium term, WSL and Eawag are to be amalgamated into this internationally prominent institute, which has a working title of “Swiss Federal Institute of Technology for Environment and Sustainability”. The ETH Board is thus also responding strategically to an external evaluation, which recommends that cooperation within the ETH Domain should be strengthened. The next step will be to clarify the question of how energy research topics at PSI and Empa that relate to the new institute could be pooled more effectively; this will be done in consultation with ETH Zurich and EPFL.

Combining the strengths of WSL and Eawag under one roof and one management offers an opportunity to exploit synergies while also boosting international visibility and cooperation on content. The ambition of the ETH Board is to supplement the existing top-class competencies of WSL and Eawag with additional relevant focus areas. These additional thematic focuses will be developed jointly with the researchers. No changes are planned as regards the current sites, job numbers and key national tasks. "It is high time for this kind of institute for the environment and sustainability," says Beth Krasna, President of the ETH Board. "Current events and debates show that society is demanding solutions for a sustainable future. Thanks to its leading international research and its technological and scientific expertise, the ETH Domain has an important role to play."

Enhanced cooperation in the ETH Domain and next steps

The two research institutes PSI and Empa, as well as the two universities ETH Zurich and EPFL, will also be encouraged to strengthen their coordination and cooperation with the new institution. A specific working group has been tasked with working out the research activities to be undertaken by the new institute, and will devise these in close cooperation with researchers from the subject areas concerned over the next few months. The working group consists of representatives of all institutions of the ETH Domain. At the same time, it will be necessary to formulate the mission of the future institute and prepare for the political process. Before the documents are submitted to the Federal Council, an official internal consultation process on these subjects will be held with the institutions next year. On the one hand, the selected procedure will ensure strategic leadership by the ETH Board, which defines the overarching orientation. On the other, the strong involvement of the researchers and management of the institutions guarantees that the topics covered and the portfolio of research activities are in line with the ETH Domain's claim to be a leading international research centre.

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The ETH Board is the strategic management and supervisory body of the ETH Domain. The ETH Domain is made up of the two Federal Institutes of Technology, i.e. ETH Zurich and EPFL, as well as the four federal research institutes PSI, WSL, Empa and Eawag. The members of the ETH Board are appointed by the Swiss Federal Council. The ETH Board supervises the development plans of the institutions, is responsible for strategic management accounting and ensures coordination. It draws up the budget and the financial statements of the ETH Domain and coordinates the value maintenance and continued functionality of the properties. It is the authority responsible for appointments and represents the ETH Domain before the federal authorities. A staff assists the ETH Board in the preparation and implementation of its business.