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# WSL Mission and Strategic Outlook 2025–2028



Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL



## Vision

### Research for people and the environment in a changing world

The Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL provides science-based solutions for forests, landscapes, biodiversity, natural hazards, and snow and ice in a changing world. As a federal research institute and part of the ETH Domain, WSL commits itself to excellence in research and implementation that benefits nature and society.

## Mission

As the leading Swiss research institute for terrestrial environmental systems, WSL performs outstanding research at the national and international levels that benefits the environment and society in Switzerland and beyond. We address global challenges driven by land use change, climate change, biodiversity loss, altered biogeochemical cycles, and urbanisation, as well as their interactions. WSL is thus in a position to develop science-based solutions for sustainable approaches that serve both the environment and society. We accomplish this together with partners from research, practice and the public, to effectively support environmental decision-making and governance. To train the next generations of decision-makers, we engage in teaching and continuing education in the field of terrestrial environmental science. Through its activities and engagement with society, WSL bridges the science-policy gap and contributes to a future rooted in sustainability.

## WSL's unique selling points

WSL performs mission-oriented research as the basis for evidence-driven information for policy-makers and implementation in practice:

- WSL is the leading institute for solution-oriented terrestrial environmental research in Switzerland;
- WSL is the first point of contact for stakeholders on topics related to the terrestrial environment and to the management of natural resources and risks;
- WSL delivers key national services for Switzerland in the fields of forests, landscapes, biodiversity, natural hazards and snow and ice;
- WSL is a leader in long-term studies and in the monitoring and modelling of environmental systems; it develops and maintains unique infrastructure and data resources.



## Academic Core Tasks

The major environmental shifts of the Anthropocene, such as the climate and biodiversity crises, land-use change, altered biogeochemical cycles, urbanisation, and their interactions, result in challenges for the terrestrial environment and for society. WSL is mandated to address these challenges comprehensively in an inter- and transdisciplinary way. WSL's main fields of activity are research, knowledge transfer and application in practice, dialogue with society and politics, and teaching. With its expertise and activities, WSL delivers key national services for Switzerland and supports the strategic objectives of the ETH Domain, in particular in the areas of "Energy, Climate and Environmental Sustainability" and "Engagement and Dialogue with Society".

WSL is committed to maintaining the highest principles of scientific integrity and ethical standards, creating an environment conducive to innovative research. WSL actively engages in FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, reusable) and open research data (ORD) practices to foster collaborations and a culture of sharing.

### Research

WSL identified four societally relevant and scientifically promising development foci for the coming decade as part of the WSL Strategy 2035 (Figure 1). They build on WSL's research and expertise in the five core thematic areas, integrate across themes and disciplines, and enhance WSL's contribution to addressing important global challenges. These foci are briefly described below.

*Global change impacts: mitigation and adaptation.* Understanding global change is key for projecting its impacts and providing solutions for mitigation and adaptation. Building on decades of research and monitoring campaigns in its core thematic areas, WSL will make a decisive contribution to addressing mitigation and adaptation.

*Sustainable urbanization for liveable cities.* The goal of sustainable urbanisation is to create and maintain socially inclusive, environmentally responsible, economically viable, and biodiverse and healthy cities that are resilient to climate change. With its experience in the core thematic areas, WSL is well equipped to take the next step in investigating and understanding urban spaces and to develop appropriate solutions.

*Environmental governance.* A thorough understanding and critical assessment of the key elements of governance are essential for improving decision-making processes, forms of collaboration, formal and informal regulations, and policy implementation. Based on a long history of complementing natural science research with social science studies, WSL will systematise environmental governance research to further increase the effectiveness of the institute's research in all fields.

*Multifunctional landscapes and ecosystems.* The complex interactions of societies with their physical and biological environment manifest themselves in interconnected multifunctional landscapes and ecosystems across Switzerland, from the lowlands to high-alpine regions. This development focus will build on WSL's extensive experience in studying natural resources, ecosystem

Fig. 1. WSL Strategy 2035  
[wsl.ch/en/publications/wsl-strategy-2035](https://wsl.ch/en/publications/wsl-strategy-2035)





services, multifunctionality and land-use conflicts, as well as physical and perceived landscapes.

WSL will embrace emerging challenges and opportunities in research and implementation through these four development foci, and by advancing its core thematic areas. In addition, WSL will focus on furthering methodological advancements in (i) monitoring and infrastructure, (ii) integrated modelling, and (iii) targeted method development, to keep abreast of the rapidly evolving research methods driven by digitalisation, including artificial intelligence, and technological innovation.

### **Collaborations**

Cooperation and coordination at the national and international levels are of great importance for WSL, in research and teaching, knowledge transfer and application in practice, and dialogue with society and politics. Given the excellent research environment the ETH Domain offers, WSL collaborates foremost with Domain institutions, resulting in synergies and increased efficiency. Collaborations span across WSL's main fields of activity, and they include joint and shared infrastructure, services and positions, such as several joint and adjunct professorships held by WSL employees. Examples of successful collaborations that will extend into the coming planning period are the ETH Board Joint Initiatives, the Open Research Data and Open Science initiatives at the Domain level, the 4RI ENRICH project streams and activities, Lib4RI (the shared library of the four research institutes in the ETH Domain), and LeadCampus. WSL will also actively engage in the "Fit for the Future" project of the ETH Board, which aims to review the current structure of the Domain and to evaluate whether

other structures might be better suited for future challenges.

### **Teaching and continuing education**

WSL offers high-quality teaching in collaboration with ETH Zurich, EPFL and other higher education institutions in Switzerland and abroad, focusing on areas where WSL has national and international expertise. Future emphasis will be placed on integrating solution-oriented research with teaching and leveraging the institute's inter- and transdisciplinary expertise in its core thematic areas.

### **Knowledge transfer and dialogue with society**

To strengthen its role as a competence centre for knowledge transfer, a substantial proportion of WSL's work will be dedicated to knowledge and technology transfer and outreach activities in Switzerland and internationally, including development cooperation in the Global South. WSL will collaborate with practitioners and engage with stakeholders in supporting applied research for evidence-based policy-making. It will foster syntheses and encourage dialogue with society. WSL plans to increasingly apply inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to broaden research questions and methods and to co-develop actionable knowledge with stakeholders that results in science-led decisions and implementation.

### **Tasks mandated by the federal council**

WSL fulfils several mandates set by the Federal Council. This requires access to up-to-date, high-quality scientific facilities, excellence in scientific and technical expertise, and vast experience in combining research and application for the needs of stakeholders, e.g. from practice. As a federal research institute within the ETH Domain, WSL is well-positioned to deliver such national services, including:

1. Running the Swiss National Forest Inventory and the Long-term Forest Ecosystem Research programme, and monitoring Swiss Natural Forest Reserves
2. Providing the Avalanche Warning Service for Switzerland and informing the public about avalanche danger
3. Running the Swiss Forest Health Service
4. Providing scientific and technical support for forest plant health

Aside from these legally mandated tasks, WSL provides many additional services in close collaboration with the responsible federal, but also cantonal, authorities.

## Resources

### Financial planning including use of reserves

The reduced financial growth rates envisaged in the 2025–2028 ERI Dispatch require drastic cost-cutting measures at WSL. These cuts will not come without losses in research and services.

WSL utilises the available funds responsibly, efficiently, transparently and in a targeted manner to advance innovative research and promote science and knowledge transfer. Financial reserves play an important role in ensuring WSL's financial flexibility and planning security. Because of cuts in federal funding, WSL will have to reduce its permanent workforce in the coming planning period. The reserves will allow WSL to do this in a socially responsible manner, i.e. by not replacing about 50% of the positions that become vacant because of retirements in the period 2024–2029.

### Personnel planning and working conditions

WSL is a responsible employer and continues to offer an exciting and stimulating working environment characterised by: transparent information, structures and processes; mutual respect; the highest possible flexibility and freedom in research within the framework of legal, contractual, corporate and strategic regulations; a practised culture of equal opportunity; responsible leadership; and integrity and fairness.

### Real estate and infrastructure planning – sustainability

WSL currently manages buildings worth roughly CHF 110 million. The maintenance and preservation of these buildings and their functionality at the current level is essential and helps to avoid substantial cost implications in the future. Nevertheless, due to the financial situation, maintenance must focus on the most important and urgent measures. In addition to repairs, seismic upgrades to buildings A and B in Davos and the renovation of an old workshop building in Birmensdorf, which is insufficiently insulated and in poor general condition, are planned for the 2025–2028 period. WSL will invest CHF 3 to 4 million per year for this purpose. WSL is not planning any new buildings in the years 2025 to 2028.



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