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IZTB strengthens the structure and culture surrounding irrigation in several ways

The Board of Trustees of the International Centre for Traditional Irrigation in Europe (IZTB) met in St. Urban in mid-January 2026 to make groundbreaking decisions to strengthen its structure, its network-oriented culture and thus the intangible cultural heritage according to UNESCO in the field of European irrigation landscapes. Three new members of the Foundation Board were appointed: Karina Liechti from the Swiss Landscape Conservation Foundation, Pirmin Hilsendegen from IG Queichwiesen (Rhineland-Palatinate) and Marc Reuter from the public service in Wallonia, Belgium. Together with Eric Brinckmann from the Netherlands, they will now more directly secure the connection between IZTB and local bearers across Europe, and increasingly in additional countries. For the time being, from 2026 to 2028, IZTB can count on the support of the Swiss Federal Office of Culture and is thus the recognised organisation in the field of traditional irrigation throughout Switzerland and Europe.

The four members of the Foundation Board mentioned above are supported by the management teams in St. Urban, Switzerland (Werner Stirnimann) and Forchheim, Germany (Julia Schrade). Strengthening the structures is particularly important because, on the one hand, the organisations responsible for the irrigation regions already included in the UNESCO Representative List are developing increasingly extensive activities and, on the other hand, organisations in France, Greece, Spain and, in all likelihood, Portugal are well on the way to submitting their applications to add their rich intangible cultural heritage in the Mediterranean region to the UNESCO list. The application will be submitted in March 2026. The IZTB has been supporting this process for a year and a half. From 2026 to 2028, it can now count on financial support of CHF 30,000 per year from the Federal Office of Culture and, following the relevant application process, is now definitively recognised throughout Switzerland and Europe as the organisation in the field of traditional irrigation.

The new IZTB Foundation Board members on 14 January 2026 in front of St. Urban Monastery Church: from left to right: Pirmin Hilsendegen (IG Queichwiesen), Karina Liechti (Swiss Landscape Conservation Foundation) and Marc Reuter (Wallonia Public Service)



© Image, Werner Stirnimann, IZTB

White stork and co. connects Wässermatten with Queichwiesen (water meadows)

The International Centre for Traditional Irrigation in Europe (IZTB) is located in St. Urban, in the Swiss Wässermatten (water meadows) region. The Wässermatten Foundation, based in Langenthal, is one of the organisations working together at European level within the framework of the IZTB. Following the aforementioned IZTB Foundation Board meeting, a meeting was held between stakeholders from the Wässermatten area and a representative from the Queichwiesen area near Karlsruhe (Germany). In these Rhineland-Palatinate water meadows, around 400 hectares are irrigated every year, making it the largest contiguous traditionally irrigated meadow area in Germany. It transpired that the IG Queichwiesen is in occasional contact with the Sempach Bird Observatory (CH) because white storks ringed in Switzerland have been found in the Queichwiesen. Given the sometimes enormous flight distances covered by migratory birds, this is hardly surprising. Nevertheless, the example shows that there are many cross-border connections in the areas of land use, biodiversity, intangible cultural heritage, etc.

Like the water meadows in Oberaargau and Rottal, the Queich meadows (picture) are also very popular with white storks. While the water merely trickles over the water meadows, the Queich meadows stand in standing water for several days. Picture © W. Stirnimann, IZTB



Next international meeting in the Netherlands

While the Queich meadows are located near the Upper Rhine close to Karlsruhe, the next meeting of the traditional irrigation associations supported by the IZTB will take place in the Netherlands at the end of May 2026. The trip will take participants on excursions from the Dutch-Belgian border region to the three branches of the Rhine delta, namely the Waal, Lek and IJssel. Traditional irrigation is practised at three locations in this area. Unlike in Valais, for example, where water is supplied via suonen or bisses and often over a difference in altitude of well over 1,000 metres, in the European lowlands, water distribution has to be achieved with a difference of just a few dozen centimetres.

As in Forchheim (Germany) in 2025 and South Tyrol (Italy) in 2024, representatives from the countries that have participated to date (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Italy) will take part, now joined by representatives from France, Spain, Portugal and, possibly, Greece..

Background information on the IZTB

Representatives of local organisations in Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands (including the Wässermatten Foundation in Langenthal) have joined forces under the umbrella of the International Centre for Traditional Irrigation (IZTB), based in the former St. Urban monastery (Switzerland), to preserve and continue the knowledge and techniques of traditional irrigation. This centre acts as an international hub and networking platform for exchange between the participating countries and UNESCO. A first major success was the inclusion of traditional irrigation in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List on 5 December 2023 in Botswana..

Traditional irrigation as a sustainable form of land use

Against the backdrop of climate change, traditional irrigation will continue to play an important role in preserving cultural landscapes and improving the landscape water balance. It promotes biodiversity, contributes to soil formation and thus has positive effects on agricultural yields. Especially in times of increasing heat waves, traditional irrigation helps to counteract climate change by positively influencing the microclimate and enabling natural cooling of the environment. It also makes an important contribution to drought prevention by ensuring a steady water supply and strengthening the landscape's resilience to extreme weather events. This sustainable irrigation system combines various themes and creates synergistic effects that benefit both nature and agriculture. By combining tradition and innovation, traditional irrigation is a holistic approach that is in harmony with the ecological and climatic challenges of our time.

Contact and referral of further contacts:

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Regional images available: Traditional irrigation methods vary from region to region, depending on the natural conditions. Are you interested in characteristic images? Take a look at www.medien.iztb.ch (switch to English) or contact the IZTB.

Here is an initial overview of Swiss photos:

Schweiz



Bisse d'Ayent © IZTB/Werner Stirnimann, 2023



Bisse de Lens, passerelle © Musée valaisan des Bisses, 2012



Irrigation traditionnelle, Valais © Switzerland Tourism (André Meier and SL-FP), 2019



Musée des Bisses © IZTB/Werner Stirnimann, 2023



Rottaler Wässermatten LU/BE © Werner Stirnimann



Wässerriese Ausserberg © IZTB/Werner Stirnimann, 2023



Suone, Wallis © Stiftung Landschaftsschutz Schweiz/Karina Liechti, 2019



Suonenbaukurs © Nico Renggli, SAJA, 2022



Wässermattenbannwart Heinz Duppenthaler © IZTB/Werner Stirnimann, 2022



Wässerriese Ausserberg © Switzerland Tourism (André Meier and SL-FP), 2019



Wässermatten Gruenholz Roggwil © Werner Stirnimann, 2019



Wässermatten © BeKo/Wässermatten-Stiftung, 2018