"Setting the strategic priorities, and rethinking them from time to time, is central"

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Topics: Organisation & Staff

At the start of the year, Martin Ackermann took over as Director of Eawag. In our "Three Questions"-interview, he reveals how he got off to a successful start and what he plans for the Swiss water research institute.

You have been working at Eawag for 13 years, and now you are heading the research institute as director. What is this change like for you?

I know the staff and the culture at Eawag - but the topics I am now working on are entirely different. Now the focus is on the development of our institute and contacts with the outside world. In the last two weeks, I have become acquainted with exciting projects at Eawag, ideas and applications that I did not yet know.

However, what I already knew and appreciated was the atmosphere and culture of the water research institute. That the colleagues are open and used to tackling things together. That is nice and one of the reasons why I was so motivated to apply for this job.

What are your plans for Eawag - what is new, and what is staying?

The change in leadership is an excellent moment to pause and ask ourselves: is our strategic direction right? Are there new issues that we should tackle together? And others that have been sufficiently answered and that we can conclude? Setting strategic priorities and rethinking them from time to time is central. What is essential is that the directorate needs help to do this, and it should be done. We need a strategic discussion across the entire institution with our ETH Domain partners and stakeholders.

> But what we want to maintain and further develop,
> is Eawag's good reputation!

Experts and organisations from the field in Switzerland and abroad value Eawag as an innovative and reliable centre of competence in the water sector. And thanks to its excellent research environment, Eawag has always succeeded in recruiting outstanding young researchers. We must retain both of these and continue to build on them to remain strong and effective in the long term.

Do you see any particular challenges you will face as the new director?

As an environmental research institute, we have two significant challenges. First, critical ecological changes are happening quickly. The effects of climate change have become apparent, and the speed of change is increasing. The same is valid for biodiversity loss, particularly in freshwaters. To counter this, we need to be agile. We need to be able to quickly absorb new findings and developments and promptly make a scientific assessment.

The second challenge is that many environmental problems are based on conflicts over resources, and therefore there are no simple solutions. Water is often at the centre. To reduce greenhouse gas emissions, Switzerland relies on hydropower and collects water in reservoirs - but this means that living organisms in streams and rivers, and also agriculture, are lacking. Politicians and administration need interdisciplinary scientific assessments to make good decisions in the face of such conflicting goals. I see this as one of the central tasks for Eawag.

Eawag is well-positioned to meet these challenges. We are agile and can keep pace with rapid developments in the environmental field. And among our researchers, interdisciplinary work and close contact with other institutions and stakeholders are deeply rooted. This enables us to provide scientific foundations for the future's important political and social decisions.

Cover picture: As the new Director, Martin Ackermann has discovered unknown sides of Eawag. He is well aware of the research institute's strengths. (Eawag, Alessandro Della Bella)

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https://www.eawag.ch/en/info/portal/news/news-archive/archive-detail/setting-the-strategic-priorities-and-rethinking-them-from-time-to-time-is-central