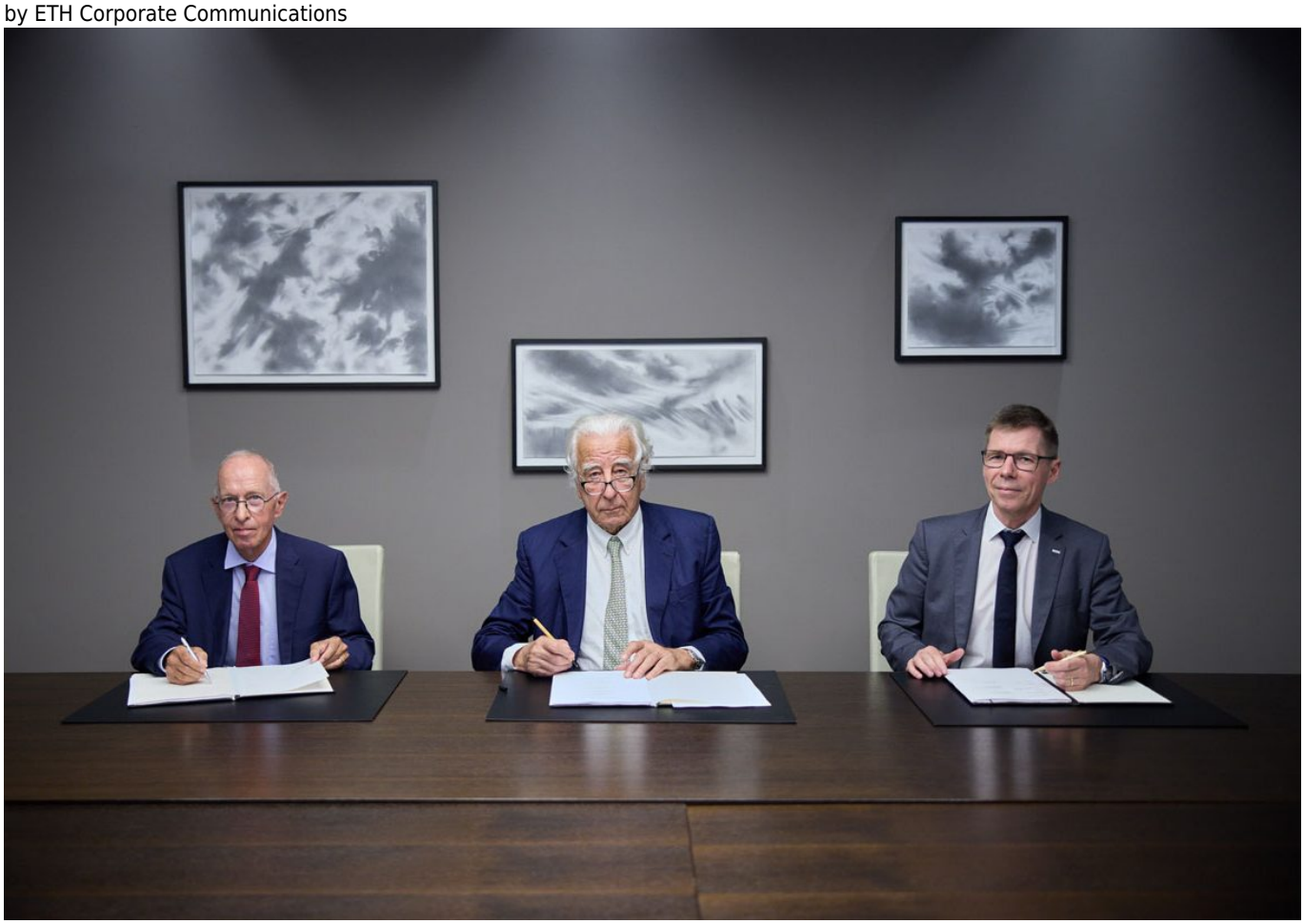
Jörg G. Bucherer-Foundation enables foundation of Earth observation centre

by ETH Corporate Communications



Prof. Pius Baschera, President of the ETH Foundation, Dr Urs Mühlebach, President of the Jörg G. Bucherer-Foundation, and ETH President Prof. Joël Mesot signing the funding agreement.
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ETH Zurich will receive 10 million Swiss francs a year from the Jörg G. Bucherer-Foundation for the next ten years. The university will use the funds to establish a competence centre for Earth observation with global appeal and a physical presence in the Canton of Lucerne. The Canton of Lucerne is to support the project as infrastructure partner.

Forecasting storms, measuring snow depth and tracking climate change: Earth observation using satellites, drones and sensors has become indispensable in many areas. Yet its potential is far from being fully exploited. The enormous quantities of data involved are still not being used in a targeted enough way. A generous donation from the Jörg G. Bucherer-Foundation amounting to 100 million Swiss francs is now set to change this.

The donation will enable ETH Zurich to establish an interdisciplinary competence centre for Earth monitoring with global appeal in the next ten years. ETH Swiss GeoLab will use data from space, from the air and on the ground as well as AI-assisted analysis methods and high-performance computers to better understand our planet and overcome specific challenges. The spectrum of possible research topics is broad: It extends from the early detection of natural disasters, such as the landslides that recently hit the Swiss municipalities of Blatten and Brienz, to predicting agricultural yields to help farmers with their planning.

Earth observation to serve wider society

ETH President Joël Mesot emphasises the opportunities that the centre will bring for Switzerland and Europe: “There are already numerous researchers at ETH who focus on Earth observation. The one-of-a-kind partnership with the Jörg G. Bucherer-Foundation will give us the unique opportunity to bring research and knowledge transfer in this important field to a new level.”

“The heart of the centre will be a technological platform that will enable us to link large amounts of data from satellites, drones, meteorological stations and other sources. This will allow us to detect things that were previously not visible to us”, explains the appointed Director Thomas Zurbuchen. The astrophysicist was Head of Science at NASA from October 2016 to the end of 2022 and in 2023 took over leadership of ETH Zurich Space as Professor of Space Science and Technology. Thomas Zurbuchen will head up ETH Swiss GeoLab together with Vice Director Verena Griess, who holds the Professorship for Forest Resources Management at ETH Zurich.

“My team and I use satellite data in our research in order to obtain information about the condition of trees, forests and terrestrial ecosystems. Earth observation is therefore particularly close to my heart and I’m excited to help establish ETH Swiss GeoLab together with Thomas Zurbuchen”, explains Verena Griess.

A long-term partnership

The Jörg G. Bucherer-Foundation was established in 2025 from the estate of Jörg G. Bucherer. Promoting natural sciences is a key objective for the Jörg G. Bucherer-Foundation, as Dr Urs Mühlebach, Chairman of the Foundation Board, outlines: “As a new foundation, we are delighted to be supporting the establishment of ETH Swiss GeoLab and, with this, to be making a pioneering contribution towards strengthening Lucerne as an economic and scientific centre. Supporting ETH Zurich’s research activities in the Canton of Lucerne is in keeping with the spirit of Jörg G. Bucherer, who was greatly concerned with pioneering research on the one hand and with promoting natural scientific activity in the Canton of Lucerne on the other.” With successful businesses in the aircraft, machinery and electronics industries and the two Lucerne-based universities, in Mühlebach’s view the region is an ideal location for the new centre.

Lucerne government councillors Reto Wyss and Fabian Peter, both of whom who helped initiate the partnership, are also delighted by the generous commitment from the Lucerne-based Jörg G. Bucherer-Foundation. “The new competence centre is an investment in the innovative strength of the Canton of Lucerne and Central Switzerland. Research within the field of Earth observation is of great relevance when it comes to tackling both global and local challenges”, outlines Fabian Peter. To support the establishment of ETH Swiss GeoLab, the Canton of Lucerne is contributing 2.8 million Swiss francs to the costs of the infrastructure for the Lucerne site over the course of ten years.

Gradual establishment lasting until 2030

The first two years will see the organisational foundations laid for the new centre and the focus areas defined in detail. Suitable premises for the centre in the Canton of Lucerne also need to be found and be ready for occupancy from 2027. Alongside research, ETH Swiss GeoLab will also be a place where new Earth observation technologies – and products and services based on these – are developed. In order to scale these technologies and ensure knowledge transfer into the world of business and wider society, start-ups and industry partners will be integrated from the outset.

ETH Swiss GeoLab will reach its full size by 2030. The centre will employ around 100 people and will also launch training and continuing education courses.

F.l.t.r: ETH Prof. Verena Griess, State Councillor Reto Wyss, Prof. Joël Mesot, ETH VP Prof. Vanessa Wood, Dr Urs Mühlebach, State Councillor Fabian Peter, ETH Prof. Thomas Zurbuchen, Prof. Pius Baschera and Sören Schwieterka, Member of the Board of Trustees of the Jörg G. Bucherer-Foundation.
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ETH news and contacts

https://ethz-foundation.ch/en/spotlight/joerg-g-bucherer-foundation-donation-eth-zurich/

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