

International Centre for Traditional Irrigation in Europe (IZTB)
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Annual Report 2025

International Centre for Traditional Irrigation in Europe (IZTB)



Members of the IZTB-Board of Trustees on 20.2.2025, accompanied by the Deputy Managing Director of IZTB-Julia Schrade (right in the picture), © Werner Stirnimann, IZTB



Group photo from the meeting of the International IZTB-Advisory Board in Forchheim (4.7.2025). Photo © IZTB

Summary

The International Centre for Traditional Irrigation in Europe (IZTB) is at once a foundation, an umbrella organisation and the hub of an extensive network dedicated to traditional irrigation. Alongside developing and defining new thematic priorities, the focus in 2025 was placed in particular on the make-up of the governing bodies and the interaction between the IZTB Foundation and the international IZTB-Advisory Board, as well as the EU branch (hosted by the Water Unit of the City of Forchheim). Near Forchheim, 2025 saw one of the various events co-organised by the IZTB take place.

In 2025, one of the IZTB's key priorities was supporting those responsible for expanding UNESCO's Representative List with elements of traditional irrigation in France, Spain, Portugal and Greece (submissions in 2026 and expected in 2028). Beyond this initiative, close collaboration with the Swiss Federal Office of Culture, other participating national representatives and non-profit-organisations continued. The development of the IZTB was also further supported by the New Regional Policy (Switzerland) and the Economic-Public Benefit Society of Bern. Significant voluntary input also fed into the archive- and documentation service, as well as into public relations, awareness-raising, education, research and innovation.

A huge thank you for all your support!

The IZTB, both an umbrella organisation and a network

The International Centre for Traditional Irrigation in Europe (IZTB) is, as a foundation, on the one hand a conventional organisation with the governing bodies: Board of Trustees, Executive Board and Executive Management as well as the Swiss Federal Foundation Supervisory Authority as an external oversight body. On the other hand, it is a shared umbrella for Europe-wide sponsoring bodies and initiatives dedicated to protecting, preserving, keeping in operation and reactivating the last remaining traditional irrigation systems, together with their distinctive cultural techniques. The IZTB therefore plays a central and highly network-building role and serves as a link between numerous stakeholders, organisations and institutions.

The key role of the IZTB in networking is hardly surprising, because with traditional irrigation the irrigation system itself, within its catchment area, already has a unifying effect in many ways—also in terms of blue-green infrastructure. Added to this is the idea of the commons, which encompasses not only the resource of water but also the community (e.g. the irrigators) and the rules associated with traditional irrigation. This socio-ecological network includes countless interfaces with other disciplines.



The IZTB is the umbrella organisation for just over a dozen local bodies linked to traditional irrigation systems, but it now connects—directly or indirectly—a large number of cooperatives, shared-rights associations, clubs, networks, and more. The group pictured visited the irrigator Markus Galster on 2.7.2025 in his irrigated meadows near the town of Forchheim. Images © IZTB.

Alongside its thematic breadth, the IZTB also spans the geographical reach of western Europe and works across generations. This means the IZTB must continually renew itself, adapt, develop further and refocus its work. In addition to defining new thematic priorities (see below), in 2025 attention was placed specifically on the composition of its governing bodies and on how the IZTB Foundation works together with the International IZTB Advisory Board as well as the EU office as an optimal complement to the headquarters in Switzerland.

An important new development in early 2025 was the unanimous approval of a cooperation agreement with the Franconian town of Forchheim by the IZTB-Foundation Board in St Urban. Immediately afterwards, the IZTB-Foundation Board was expanded to include Uwe Kirschstein, Lord Mayor of the town of Forchheim, and the IZTB-Forchheim branch was officially brought into operation. It is overseen by the Head of Forchheim's Water Management Staff Unit, Julia Schrade, who has also served as Deputy Managing Director of IZTB since February 2025.

Just a few months later, the IZTB-Forchheim branch, together with the Bavarian Academy for Nature Conservation and Landscape Management (ANL), invited participants to a two-day specialist conference in

in Hausen near Forchheim. Fittingly for the early-July summer heat, the conference theme was “The potential of traditional cultural practices in a changing climate: irrigated meadows against drought and heat”. Several representatives of IZTB played an active role in shaping the specialist conference. Also present on site was a delegation from the German Association for Landscape Conservation, which is running a project through to autumn 2026 on climate-adapted water management, with a particular focus on irrigated meadows.

Almost seamlessly, the discussions and exchanges from the ANL-specialist conference were then continued as part of the International Advisory Board meeting in Forchheim. Alongside an in-depth thematic discussion in a workshop setting, a key innovation was the move from a single chair to a four-person Advisory Board-leadership team as the link between the International IZTB-Advisory Board and the IZTB Foundation. The advisory meeting in Forchheim was further enriched by an extensive excursion to the irrigation region of Schwabach, south of Nuremberg.



The initiator and project lead of the IZTB-soil project, Eric Brinckmann (pictured on the right with the four people) visited Forchheim’s Lord Mayor, Uwe Kirschstein, together with his wife Edwin Brinckmann Rouffaer, as well as Julia Schrader, Head of Forchheim’s Water Unit (image left © City of Forchheim). Eric Brinckmann, together with Pirmin Hilsendegen, Karina Liechti and Marc Reuter (l-r, image right © IZTB), forms the new leadership team of the IZTB-Advisory Board.

The thematic overview and the feedback from the advisory board meeting in Forchheim were taken up in early November 2025 as part of an IZTB-retreat in St Urban and already factored into the IZTB’s future structure. All four members of the new advisory board-leadership team will also join the IZTB-Board of Trustees from 2026, which will make collaboration and coordination between the International IZTB-Advisory Board and the IZTB Foundation easier. At the same time, the former “IZTB-Team” was dissolved, leaving the Foundation even more streamlined, with the following bodies: Board of Trustees, Executive Board and Executive Management.

The IZTB-retreat was, by the way, framed by an early-evening programme, a subsequent evening programme and breakfast, along with a short excursion to the Rottal irrigation meadows—as with so many IZTB activities—offering opportunities for exchange and networking.

In terms of content, the IZTB-retreat identified the following three priorities for the work ahead:

- Preservation and maintenance, safeguarding
- Public relations and awareness-raising
- Research and innovation

While the first point also covers archiving and documentation, the second also includes educational aspects.

Expansion process to additional countries

Since April 2024 efforts have been under way to extend the listing of traditional irrigation on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity to include additional countries and stakeholder organisations. IZTB Managing Director Werner Stirnimann has been involved from the outset, while IZTB Foundation Board member Ingeborg Vonderstrass and Deputy IZTB Managing Director Julia Schrade have been providing support since spring 2025—initially for the team at Panthéon–Sorbonne University, and later for other committed partners from France, Spain, Portugal and Greece.



With conceptual support and some organisational assistance from IZTB, Mirjam Neu from the French association for the preservation and protection of traditional irrigation and its related structures (ASAIG) organised a multi-day conference in Nice, including an excursion to the Vesubie Valley (29.4.2025). It became clear just how devastating flood events can be for irrigation systems that had previously remained intact. Restoration is a topic of heated debate in France. Images © IZTB.

On several occasions, the expansion process benefited from input towards solutions—whether in terms of content or terminology. As a result, by the end of 2025 prospects looked very good that the joint application for an extension could be submitted to UNESCO on time by the end of March 2026. Yet, all of a sudden, the submission had to be limited to the countries—and respective stakeholder organisations—in France and Greece. This was because an unexpected scheduling issue arose in Portugal, and in Spain the various political levels (agriculture, culture and environment) needed more time to coordinate (submission now likely in 2028).



Women's and men's strength on display at the meeting of the countries already inscribed by UNESCO, together with representatives of the planned extension, at Sorbonne-Panthéon University in Paris (3.11.2025). IZTB Advisory Board leadership team member Karina Liechti (far left) and IZTB Managing Director Werner Stirnimann each gave a talk. Images © IZTB.

Project supported by the Federal Office of Culture (FOC)

In early February 2025, an online meeting took place with one female and one male representative from the Federal Office of Culture (BAK), along with representatives from other participating countries (the so-called Focal Points) via an online meeting. The main focus was the current status of the IZTB in its role as a national and international umbrella organisation, coordination hub and service provider for local custodians of intangible cultural heritage in the field of traditional irrigation. It was announced that BAK would be launching a call for proposals in summer 2025. IZTB subsequently submitted an extensive application, and BAK then approved annual financial support for the years 2026-2028. This further strengthens IZTB's role as an umbrella organisation.



As part of the BAK co-funded project (2023-2026), in 2025 a Valais delegation was introduced to the Oberaargau irrigation meadows (16.3.2025) (photo left), and took part in the International Day of Irrigation at the Grand Bisse d'Ayent (11.10.2025). Alongside a delegation from France, an engaging exchange also took place in Lower Valais with a delegation from the Ticino Biosphere (IT) — see photo right. Images © IZTB.

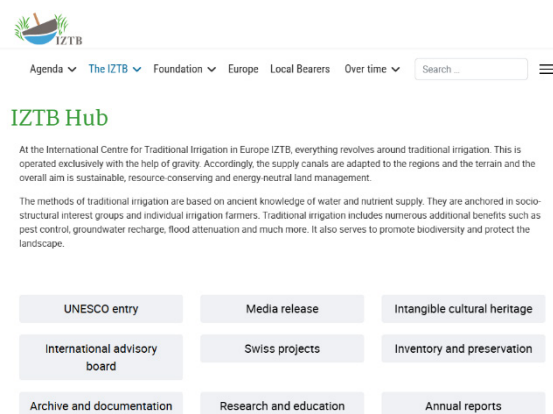
In addition, close dialogue was maintained in particular with the Swiss Heritage Society and the Suonen Museum in Botyre (VS), and a range of synergies were put to good use. This included, for example, media work and events.



Collaboration with the Suonen-Museum in Botyre, Valais, was strengthened in 2025. This included the exchange visits (see above) and a film screening ("Si les glaciers ne revenaient pas"), as well as a panel discussion on traditional irrigation as part of the Rottal Harvest Festival (15.10.2025). Images © IZTB.

Project supported by the New Regional Policy and OGG Bern

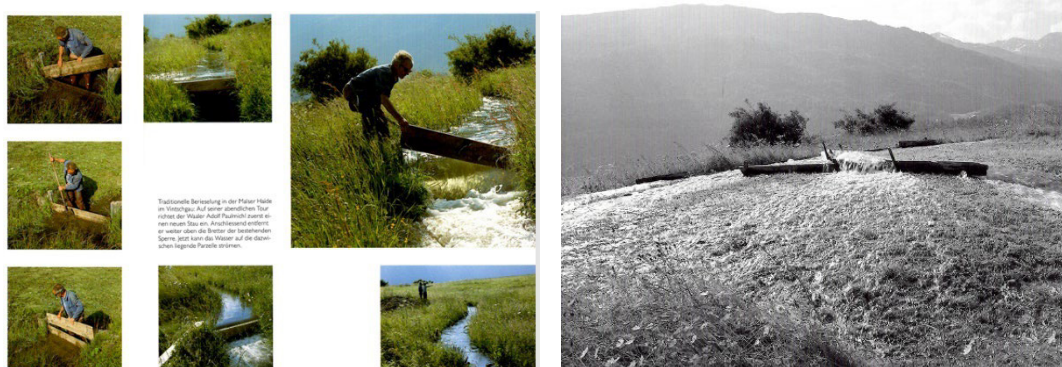
Through the project “Establishment and Operation of the International Centre for Traditional Irrigation (IZTB)”, and with support from Switzerland’s “New Regional Policy” as well as the Economic-Charitable Society of Bern (OGG), individual IZTB-areas can be developed between 2022 and 2026. Towards the end of the project, in 2025, particular focus shifted to the sub-project Archive, Documentation and Digitisation. Following an exchange with the Ernst Roth-Foundation in Burgdorf, the archive in St. Urban was further expanded, and in October the estate of Prof Dr Christian Leibundgut was taken over. A digital high-level inventory carried out by a specialist company provided insights into the informational- and evidential value of the estate. In addition, a detailed digital archive-catalogue was created for a small, selected part of the estate, and this material was further developed within a conceptual framework. A workshop with IZTB-representatives from various regions was also prepared for mid-January 2026.



The digital preliminary inventory of the estate delivered by Prof. Dr Christian Leibundgut also provides valuable insights, for example for the IZTB website, now also available entirely in English (iztb.org). Image © IZTB.

In addition, further foundational work and translations of key (online-) content into English were produced. With interest from France, Spain, Portugal and Greece, the IZTB-network continues to shift strongly away from a German-language-centred network towards French and, above all, English.

As a result, the IZTB, based in St. Urban, is bringing together and sharing an ever-growing range of resources and expertise in support of collaboration between the participating sponsoring organisations.



In 2025, Swiss photographer Jürg Stauffer contacted the IZTB regarding his historical photographs from the Vinschgau. The South Tyrolean heritage conservation association was also very interested and thanked the IZTB for putting them in touch. Images © Jürg Stauffer, Langenthal.

Public Relations and Awareness-Raising

Under the guidance of IZTB-Foundation Board member Rolf Tanner, Karina Liechti, Ingeborg Vonderstrass and Werner Stirnimann prepared the article “Traditional Irrigation as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage”, which was subsequently published in 2025 in a special anniversary issue marking the European Landscape Convention in this publication. In time for the release, the IZTB-website was also available in English (iztb.org). With support from the IZTB-secretariat, Rolf Tanner also launched the ARKUM research conference in Langenthal, CH, which will take place in 2026 on a notably large scale.

In addition, with support from the Wässermatten-Foundation (as a potential award recipient) an application for UNESCO’s Mercuri-Prize was prepared. Foundation Board member Raimund Rodewald recommended the Wässermatten in Upper Aargau as a showcase example of safeguarding an irrigation landscape. In the end, the prize was awarded to the Wazee wa Mazingira (Council of Elders) from Kenya for their efforts to protect the Mount Kulal Biosphere-Reserve. In return, the Wässermatten-Foundation now has an expanded set of documentation relating to the Wässermatten in Upper Aargau. And UNESCO sent IZTB a letter of thanks.



The Wässermatten in the Oberraargau are protected in exemplary fashion. Images © Werner Stirnimann.

Public outreach by the IZTB-branch office in Forchheim focused in particular on the IZTB-Advisory Board meeting in Forchheim, as well as an article in a water-management association journal (DWA) and an article in a publication by the Academy for Nature Conservation and Landscape Management (ANL). In addition, Julia Schrade supported an online-lecture by Alwin Geimer on evidencing historic irrigation practices, using East Belgium as an example. Alwin Geimer also launched a project to develop online-walking tips highlighting sites linked to traditional irrigation.

Education

After Foundation Board member Rolf Tanner commissioned a specialist study in the field of subject didactics at the Universities of Teacher Education in Lucerne and Bern in 2024, it was submitted by the four Master’s students in early 2025 and presented as part of a subject-didactics conference at the University of Teacher Education Lucerne.

At the end of 2025 came the welcome news that Barbara Vollmer’s project at the University of Bamberg is being supported by the German Environmental Foundation, meaning it can be delivered from late 2025 through to 2028. The project title: “Pupils pass on key experiences in the natural heritage of irrigated meadows (SchützEN)”

Research and Innovation

In 2025, Eric Brinckmann, together with Wageningen University (NL), pushed ahead with DNA-based soil analyses of irrigated land in Het Lankheet, Lommel, Forchheim and Nuremberg even further. Delft University of Technology is also on board with the project.



Combined Dutch–German expertise during sample collection on a plot belonging to Markus Galster near Forchheim. Images © Julia Schrade, City of Forchheim.

The work was preceded in 2024 by a preparatory meeting in Lommel with stakeholders from the Netherlands and Belgium. The research findings from eDNA- and soil-sensor measurements were shared. Four irrigation sites were compared using eDNA-measurements: Het Lankheet and De Pelterheggen (both NL), as well as Lommel and Mol (both BE). Although Lankheet is far from the other locations, the sandy soils are comparable. The results revealed remarkable findings: After four decades of irrigation, the Lommel plots could hold their own against the best soils at Wageningen University’s test site. Vitality was higher even on areas only recently brought under irrigation than on regularly managed grassland. What is certainly striking is that irrigated meadows have a considerable capacity to store moisture and therefore cope better with (extreme) dry spells than standard, non-irrigated plots.

At the beginning of October 2025, the project “Hypabio” got under way in Cierreux — short for “Hydrologie, Patrimoine et Biodiversité” (hydrology linked with cultural heritage and biodiversity) — as part of a collaboration between the University of Liège (BE) and Université du Québec (CA), at the sites of Trois-Rivières and Rimouski.

In addition, the FLOWS project was reviewed in November 2025 and received a positive assessment. It is a three-year funded initiative of the German Federal Ministry of Research, expected to be delivered by the Universities of Mainz and Munich, in close partnership with the IZTB branch in Forchheim and IZTB more broadly. The focus is on future skills in sustainable water management, with particular emphasis on sharing knowledge around the intangible cultural heritage of traditional irrigation.



Appendix A

IZTB Foundation 2025

Board of Trustees:

Hans-Jürg Käser, 4900 Langenthal (Chair)
Christine Badertscher, 4922 Thunstetten (Vice-Chair)
René Abgottspon, 3937 Baltschieder
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Uwe Kirschstein, 91301 Forchheim, DE
Markus Ischi, 4900 Langenthal
Raimund Rodewald, 2502 Biel
Rolf Tanner, 4917 Melchnau
Ingeborg Vonderstrass, D-79238 Ehrenkirchen
Rolf Weingartner, 3604 Thun

Foundation Board Executive Committee: Hans-Jürg Käser, Markus Ischi, Rolf Weingartner
Managing Director: Werner Stirnimann, 4900 Langenthal
Deputy Managing Director: Julia Schrade, 91301 Forchheim DE

Appendix B

IZTB Hub

The Foundation's purpose is to preserve, establish and nurture traditional irrigation as a shared cultural heritage of Europe. To this end, the Foundation particularly supports research, historical documentation and the restoration of selected water-use systems.

The purpose and mission of the IZTB Foundation is to provide financial and organisational support for the "International Centre for Traditional Irrigation in Europe" (IZTB), founded in autumn 2020, in all its activities and projects. As the supporting institution, the IZTB, based in the former St Urban Monastery, serves as the shared umbrella for Europe-wide organisations and initiatives dedicated to protecting, preserving and keeping in operation—and, where possible, reactivating—the last remaining traditional irrigation systems and their unique cultural techniques.