Call innovate! fund 2026

Future Water: Technologies, Models and Infrastructures for Tomorrow

Preamble

The non-profit Joachim Herz Stiftung (JHS) was established in 2008 and is one of the largest German foundations. It is committed to innovation and the transfer of cutting-edge research so that more research findings can be put into practice and generate societal benefits. Despite excellent basic research, comparatively few research results find their way into practical applications in Germany. In order to overcome global challenges such as climate change or resource scarcity, bold and innovative approaches are needed, which can be developed in particular by bringing together different perspectives and competences. The JHS recognizes the urgent need to specifically promote the use of research results for societal relevant applications. To this end, the JHS has developed innovative funding formats for interdisciplinary and practice-oriented projects in order to break new ground in the scientific landscape.

1 Objective and thematic focus

With the innovate! fund, JHS supports interdisciplinary research groups with a focus on the natural and engineering sciences that aim to further develop their research in an application-oriented manner and thereby contribute to a smart use of water.

This year's call for proposals focuses on projects that sustainably ensure the availability, quality, and accessibility of the vital resource water through novel technologies, models, and infrastructures. This includes, for example, innovative processes for the purification and treatment of (drinking) water—particularly regarding contaminants that existing systems capture inadequately or inefficiently, such as micro- and nanoplastics, POPs, or hormones—as well as methods for extracting usable substances from wastewater (e.g., nitrate). Also eligible for funding are forward-looking technologies that use water in novel or particularly efficient ways, such as as a component in energy technologies, as well as pioneering infrastructures or models for sustainable water management in landscapes that significantly expand current possibilities for water management.

2 Target group / requirements for application

The innovate! fund is aimed at collaborations between researchers (including cross-institutional partnerships), with a focus on the natural and engineering sciences, consisting of at least three PhD-level scientists from different disciplines. The lead applicant must be a university or another research institution (public-law or private non-profit organizations) based in one of the following federal states: Brandenburg, Berlin, Bremen, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saxony-Anhalt, or Schleswig-Holstein. Researchers from other German federal states or from European countries may also be part of the consortium, provided that a clear majority of the requested funds (around 70%) and the cooperation partners (at least 2 out of 3 persons) remain or are active in the aforementioned priority region.

3 Funding / eligible costs

As part of the application for the innovate! fund, up to a total of €1 million in funding can be requested for a maximum period of five years. Funding is provided exclusively for research projects within the meaning of § 52 (2) No. 1 AO (promotion of science and research) in the pre-competitive area. This means that the project must be at a stage after basic research and before market readiness (typically Technology Readiness Level 3–6). Economic applications are only considered insofar as they serve the common good and do not directly promote individual companies or commercial interests.

Eligible costs include, among others, personnel and material expenses, rental of infrastructure, or travel costs. Pure administrative costs of the participating institution (overhead) are not eligible. The funds are paid to the institution of the main applicant(s) based on a funding agreement.

Research results funded under the innovate! fund must generally be made accessible to the public (possibly after protective measures such as patent applications). Projects aiming for exclusive transfer or exploitation of results by individual companies are excluded from funding.

4 Evaluation criteria

The main evaluation criteria are the innovation and transfer potential as well as the scientific quality of the proposed project. The evaluation criteria include at least:

Innovation potential
The project outline is characterized by an innovative research approach with the aim of developing cutting-edge solutions for specific societal challenges. The project is characterized by a high degree of originality.

Scientific transfer
The project outline shows a clear strategy for the use of the research results for societal relevant applications.

Interdisciplinarity
The project described in the project outline takes an interdisciplinary approach, using the joint potential of the various disciplines.

Scientific quality
The project outline contains a clear research question derived from the current state of research. The applicants' methods and their approach are sound and appropriate to address the research question(s).

Qualification of the applicants
Applicants demonstrate outstanding knowledge and promising development potential in their field. Their previous work and activities provide an excellent basis for their future research projects.

Societal relevance
The research project makes a societally relevant contribution to sustainable development in the field of a smart use of water.

Sustainability
The research project supports a holistic approach to sustainability that balances economic aspects with the preservation of planetary boundaries and social issues and takes a long-term perspective.

5 Selection process

All submitted projects will be formally evaluated by the JHS for their suitability for this call. The group with the most promising research project will be selected by an expert jury in a two-step process. After reviewing the written applications, promising projects will be selected by the jury, and the applicants will be invited to present their project at the JHS. The final decision will be made following the pitches.

The jury is composed of eminent scientists and experts who are recognised for their outstanding achievements and extensive expertise in the thematic focus of the competition.

6 Submission of applications

Applications must be submitted in writing via the JHS application portal by March 31, 2026, at the latest. The following documents must be submitted with application:

- Generally comprehensible summary of how the project contributes to a smart use of water (500 characters max. including spaces)
- Abstract of the project (approx. 0.5 pages, max. 2,000 characters incl. spaces)
- Description of the scientific project, answering the following questions (approx. 9 pages, max. 36,000 characters incl. spaces)

  Societal relevance (approx. 0.5 pages, max. 2,000 characters incl. spaces):

  - What societal challenge does your project address?
  - What problem do you want to solve with your research, in the long term?

Innovation potential (approx. 1 page, max. 4,000 characters incl. spaces):

- Depending on the nature of the project: Who or how many people would benefit from your solution? How significant is the societal impact potential of your approach, particularly regarding its broad applicability for the benefit of the public (market relevance)?
- What is innovative/new about your research approach?
- What is special about your project; why does it no longer fit into traditional basic research funding programs?
- How would you rate the current technological readiness level of your project and why? (no basis for assessment)

Aims (approx. 0.5 pages, max. 2,000 characters incl. spaces):

- What is the main objective of your project?
- How does your project contribute to the vision of a smart use of water?

Description of the Interdisciplinary Research Program (4 pages, max. 16,000 characters incl. spaces):

- Why do you need perspectives from different disciplines for your project and how does your project benefit from them?
- How is collaboration between the members of the research groups organized; is there experience of previous collaboration?
- What is the current state of scientific and technological research in your field?
- As concretely as possible: How do you intend to achieve the stated objective of your project?

Risk management (approx. 1.5 pages, max. 6,000 characters incl. spaces):

- What obstacles need to be overcome in the course of your project, and what risks exist?
- What measures will you take to prevent them?
- Are there any alternative approaches?
- How will you ensure the robustness of your approach?

Transfer strategy (approx. 1 page, max. 4,000 characters incl. spaces):

- How do you ensure that your project addresses actual needs in societal practice?
- How do you maintain contact with potential stakeholders in the implementation of your solution?
- How do you plan to take your research into practice?
- Assuming success: How scalable/transferable would the results of your project be?

Sustainability considerations (approx. 0.5 pages, max. 2,000 characters incl. spaces):

- To what extent is your approach suitable for long-term practice?
- How do you balance economic, environmental and social concerns?

- Rough schedule with milestones
- References
- CVs of the applicants (approx. 2 pages each, max. 8,000 characters incl. spaces)
- Cost plan (JHS template)
- Consent of the institution to manage the project (template)

7 Important dates

Application phase:
January 12, 2026 – March 31, 2026
Online information session:
February 24, 2026 (registration)
Invitation of the most promising candidates for presentation:
Beginning of June 2026
Project Pitch:
End of June 2026, JHS Hamburg
Start of funding:
Ab 01. September 2026

8 Contact

For further information, please contact Dr. Matthias Tamminga (mtamminga@joachim-herz-stiftung.de; 040/ 533295-643).

- In case of uncertainty, the German version of this document applies. -