

# innovate! center

## “Transformation Space: Resilient Water and Soil Systems of the Future”

Private transfer structure for regional transformation

### Preamble

The non-profit Joachim Herz Foundation was established in Hamburg in 2008 and is among the large German foundations. It is committed to innovation and transfer from cutting-edge research so that more research results reach practice and generate societal benefit. With the funding program “innovate! center,” the Foundation specifically supports the development of efficient transfer structures at universities. The aim is to sustainably accelerate research transfer with flexible models and ideally establish good-practice models for a future-oriented further development of transfer processes at universities.

Water and soil resources are increasingly under pressure: climate change, overuse, heavy rainfall, and pollutant inputs impair the supply of clean water and the stability of ecosystems. At the same time, erosion, sealing, and intensive use undermine the health and usability of soils, which are indispensable for food security, climate protection, and the water balance. For a sustainable future, resilient water and soil systems are therefore urgently required. Against this background, the Foundation is expanding its commitment by another innovate! center that aims to transfer scientific findings on water and soil resources into practice and develop innovative solutions to pressing societal challenges. The goal is to enable effective solutions to address key societal challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity, and the sustainable use of land—challenges that require new, scientifically grounded approaches.

## 1. Objectives and Thematic Focus

The transfer of scientific knowledge into practical application for industry and society is particularly demanding in the research area of the essential resources water and soil. It requires close collaboration across disciplines, consideration of complex spatial interrelationships, and the integration of technological, ecological, economic, and societal aspects. In addition, especially in rural areas, regional knowledge and strong networks are crucial to secure continuous, mutual, and productive exchange between science and practice.

The planned innovate! center addresses exactly this: It is conceived as a non-profit limited liability company (gGmbH) and is intended to create a privately organized transfer structure that provides a common framework for the diverse actors to shape transformation processes more flexibly, quickly, and bindingly. In shared responsibility, scientific results from water and soil research will be purposefully transferred into practical application to develop consensus-based and future-proof regional solutions, for example in agriculture and forestry. The focus is on developing and testing innovative, practical solutions under real conditions and in real environments that address ecological functions such as biodiversity, water retention, and carbon sequestration, and combine them with social and economic

requirements such as food security, water availability, and energy supply. The approaches developed are geared towards long-term effectiveness and sustainability under the conditions of global change, in particular climate change.

### Transformation Space: Resilient Water- and Soil Systems of the Future

The innovate! center aims to bundle transdisciplinary approaches that jointly address the closely interlinked resources of water and soil, translate them into transferable, cross-sectoral concepts and measures, and test them as practical solutions. These include, among others:

- Strategies for erosion control, sustainable water management, and optimized material cycles,
- Pilot projects for multifunctional landscapes (e.g. agroforestry systems, rewetted peatlands)
- Practical strategies for the use, conservation, and restoration of soils that translate scientific findings on carbon and water storage, erosion control, and nutrient cycles into effective measures.
- Novel transfer formats and pilot projects that foster exchange between science, practice, and society and enable the design of multifunctional landscapes.

The innovate! center addresses the complexity of these multi-stakeholder challenges by specifically incorporating regional characteristics and the expertise of the actors involved on a common level. The resulting practical solutions are ideally transferable to other regions and, at best, scalable models for the sustainable use of essential resources. The chosen organizational form of the innovate! center supports this process by creating a binding framework through entrepreneurial independence, flexible decision-making processes, and effective governance, in which transdisciplinary research results can be implemented quickly and in a practical manner.

## 2. Target Group and Application Requirements

German universities with proven excellence and expertise in the field of water and soil resources are eligible to apply. The program is particularly aimed at institutions that already have extensive experience in collaborating with partners in the field and can demonstrate research results with direct practical relevance, but whose structures for systematic and sustainable knowledge transfer are not yet sufficiently established or still need to be optimized. Funding is aimed at institutions whose research already has clearly recognizable transfer potential, but which has not yet been exploited through institutionally established

structures. The involvement of regional expertise and existing networks and cooperation partners is expressly welcomed.

Structural funding is intended to make a key contribution to the strategic development of the university location, professionalize existing transfer activities, and institutionalize transfer success. The detailed application requirements regarding the planned structural framework conditions and the necessary institutional readiness of the university and partner institutions are listed below in chapter 3 and 4.

### 3. Subject of Funding

#### Funding Volume

The Joachim Herz Foundation supports the innovate! center with funding of up to EUR 5 million to establish a partnership-based transfer structure and to structurally anchor transdisciplinary, practice-oriented research activities and their transfer at the location. The funding is primarily intended for the development and professionalization of the transfer structures, but at the same time enables the realization of concrete research and transfer projects at the innovate! center. The funding period is generally five years and can be adjusted to up to ten years if necessary.

Eligible costs particularly include those that contribute to building and structurally anchoring transfer activities in the stated field, for example personnel and material costs for operating the central office, for application-oriented research projects, or costs for renting infrastructure (e.g., premises, laboratories, research equipment up to a maximum of 10% of the total grant, databases, etc., but not construction costs).

Additionally, in duly justified exceptional cases, the Joachim Herz Foundation will provide the share capital to tax-privileged shareholders for participation in the gGmbH to be founded. As a general principle, however, the provision by the shareholders is desired as an expression of their commitment.

#### Structural Framework Conditions

With structural funding, the foundation aims to promote a new level and quality of networking between research, business, and society and to support practice-oriented innovation processes at the location. The transdisciplinary innovate! center is intended to help ensure that research results are utilized faster and have a measurable impact on the environment, the region, and society. It should therefore be designed in such a way that its structure ideally supports, leverages, and strengthens the water- and soil-related transfer activities available in the region and the existing cooperation among various stakeholders.

The innovate! center is to be established in the legal form of a non-profit limited liability company (gGmbH), in which the overall project will be centrally coordinated. Affiliation to the applying university as an affiliated institute (An-Institut) is possible, but not mandatory.

Funding from the Joachim Herz Foundation will be provided on the basis of a funding agreement to be concluded by December 2026 between the innovate! center gGmbH, to be established by then, and the foundation.

The applying university will become a shareholder in the gGmbH, ideally as a minority shareholder and with the participation of further suitable private-law partners such as associations, foundations, or companies. Participation by commercial enterprises requires that the non-profit status of the company is preserved and that no economic advantage is gained through shareholder status or otherwise. The Joachim Herz Foundation is available to participate as a minority shareholder if required. However, this is not a prerequisite for funding.

When designing the governance and shareholder structure, it should be ensured that the gGmbH has sufficient flexibility and entrepreneurial leeway to manage projects independently and operate economically independently. If the gGmbH is bound by federal, state, or university regulations in its ability to act due to its shareholder structure or ownership structure, it must be ensured that the structure nevertheless guarantees clear added value for the location. The advantages and benefits of a gGmbH subject to public law regulations must be presented with particular precision.

## 4. Criteria and Requirements

For a successful application, the applying university must meet the following requirements. In addition to outstanding expertise in the field, the most important selection criteria include well-founded experience in transdisciplinary collaboration between science and practice, in order to leverage these within the innovate! center and further professionalize them.

### Scientific Excellence and Thematic Fit

The future project partner proven expertise and excellent professional competence in the research area of water and soil resources. The transdisciplinary and practice-oriented research program presents innovative approaches to tangible societal challenges in the thematic focus. Regional characteristics should be taken into account and the specific expertise of different stakeholders incorporated into planning and implementation.

### Innovation and Transfer Potential

The future project partner already has well-founded experience in collaboration with practice partners to implement application-oriented research, which is to be further developed and structurally anchored through this funding.

The proposed project has the potential to leverage existing transfer activities at the location while fostering new developments to ensure sustainable success.

### Cooperations and Networks

A robust network of practice partners with the necessary (regional) expertise and the will to collaborate effectively and in partnership is in place to ensure the implementation and sustainable usability of the project results.

### Institutional Readiness

The future university partner and the associated application partners acknowledge the structural framework conditions of the innovate! center and demonstrate a strong willingness to establish the required governance structures within the defined timeframe and to participate actively in the process.

### Efficient Governance and Organizational Structure

A functionally designed and transparent governance and organizational structure is a central prerequisite for the effective management of the innovate! center. The requirements regarding legal form and entrepreneurial capacity must be explicitly taken into account (see chapter 3, Structural Framework Conditions). Early identification of a designated management team and their direct involvement in the application process is advantageous. The ownership structure must be presented, indicating the respective shares in the innovate! center

### Sustainability and Viability

Financial sustainability aspects and perspectives for the economic viability of the innovate! center after the funding period should be taken into account and considered from the outset.

### Societal Relevance

The research project makes a societally relevant contribution to sustainable development in the field of resilient water and soil systems of the future

## 5. Application Guide

A detailed guide to the application process, including explanations of the required documents, can be found [here](#).

*Note: For the successful implementation of the project, the applying university and the participating partners should involve the relevant internal departments at an early stage, as these departments will be responsible for establishing the gGmbH and concluding the required contracts if the application is successful. In view of the tight schedule – from the jury's decision in mid-July to the completion of the founding phase and the signing of all agreements by the end of 2026 – early internal coordination is strongly recommended in order to avoid delays and ensure the smooth conclusion of the funding agreement at the end of the year.*

## 6. Selection Process

All submitted proposals will be reviewed by the Joachim Herz Foundation for formal compliance and alignment with this Call. The selection of university partners with the most promising projects will be made by an expert jury in a two-stage process:

- Stage 1: Written application – Interested universities submit an application via the Joachim Herz Foundation’s application portal by April 20, 2026.
- Stage 2: Pitch of the project – If the application is approved, the university will receive an invitation in early June 2026 to give a personal presentation of the project in mid-July 2026 in Hamburg.

The final selection will be made after the pitches. The Joachim Herz Foundation will appoint a jury of renowned scientists and experts who have demonstrated outstanding achievements and comprehensive specialist knowledge as well as transfer expertise in the subject area covered by the call for proposals. The final decision will be made by the Joachim Herz Foundation based on feedback from the experts.

## 7. Dates

January 12 to April 20, 2026

- ▶ Application period

February 3, 2026

- ▶ Digital info session, registration [here](#)

Early June 2026

- ▶ Invitation of the most promising candidates to pitch their projects in Hamburg

Mid July 2026

- ▶ Pitches in Hamburg
- ▶ Announcement of selected university partners

July to December 2026

- ▶ Establishment of the gGmbH including all required formalities by the university and participating founding partners (e.g., shareholder agreement; cooperation agreement; recognition of non-profit status)

December 2026

- ▶ Conclusion of funding agreement with the gGmbH and the Joachim Herz Foundation

## 8. Contact

For information, please contact Dr. Dorothea Pieper ([dpieper@joachim-herz-stiftung.de](mailto:dpieper@joachim-herz-stiftung.de); 040/ 533295-672).

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