Colloquium, March 9th, 2020, Prof. Janet Hering, EAWAG

Working together for a sustainable future: The role of the ETH Domain and its institutions

Abstract
In 2015, 193 countries adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), making a commitment to improve both human welfare and environmental protection in a concerted manner.   Unfortunately, the world is not on track to achieve the SDGs, particularly the environmental goals. Achieving a sustainable future is increasingly recognized as the defining challenge out our time. Although a sustainable future will not be achieved only through scientific and technological advances, such advances will be essential to ensuring prosperity within the functional boundaries of our planet. Human welfare depends on the ecological functioning of our planet. Scientific advances will allow us to understand these functions so that technological advances will support and improve ecological function and not impair critical ecosystem services.

In September 2019, the ETH Board identified the need for research in the ETH Domain institutions to contribute to a sustainable future for Switzerland and the world. In December 2019, the ETH Board approved the blueprint of a parliamentary ordinance to establish a new research institute for environment and sustainability, absorbing Eawag and WSL (which would cease to exist as autonomous research institutes).   This ordinance and its accompanying dispatch are currently the subject of an internal hearing within the ETH Domain.

The goal set by the ETH Board clearly exceeds the current capacities and competencies of Eawag and WSL. How will ETH Zurich and the other institutions of the ETH Domain contribute to meeting this challenge? Will the establishment of a new institute (and the accompanying dissolution of Eawag and WSL) facilitate or hinder achieving this goal? Are there alternatives to the proposed restructuring that could be more agile and flexible as well as possibly more effective in promoting research for a sustainable future?