Swiss Natural History Collections Network

Funding regulations

The National Steering Board of the Swiss Natural History Collections Network based on

– Federal decree on credits for research funding institutions for the years 2021–2024, article 2 paragraph 1 letter d (16.09.2020),
– the Rules of Procedure of the Swiss Natural History Collections Network (27.08.2021),
– the implementation plan of the Swiss Natural History Collections Network (27.08.2021),
– the Zusatzprotokoll zur Leistungsvereinbarung 2021–2024 zwischen der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft und der Akademie der Naturwissenschaften Schweiz (SCNAT) im Rahmen der "Swiss Natural History Collections Network (SwissCollNet)" Initiative (12.05.2021).

issues the following Regulations:

Chapter 1   Scope of SwissCollNet funding

The long-term goal of SwissCollNet is to make data of natural history collections and specimens curated in Switzerland available for research and education by seeking for a nationwide harmonisation of specimen data, achieving data interoperability among all relevant stakeholders such as natural history museums, botanical gardens and institutions of higher education and providing open-access to specimen data.

The main objective of this four-year period 2021–2024 is to identify, priorise and digitise as many collections as possible relevant for research and to set the foundations for an online portal, the Swiss Virtual Natural History Collection, hereafter SVNHC, which will provide open-access to harmonised specimen data. Funding priority will be given to the development of the SVNHC and to harmonise and integrate specimen data of selected collections into the SVNHC.

SwissCollNet will fund the additional effort necessary to bring selected collections to a standardised level in regard to quality of the specimens and their aggregated data for integration into the SVNHC, following three strategic endeavors, namely:

1. conditioning of collections following defined standards, to prepare the specimens for digitisation,
2. digitising (databasing and/or imaging) specimens for their future integration in the SVNHC,
3. promoting training of collection management and taxonomic expertise.

Natural history collections cover mineral and sediment samples, rocks and meteorites, specimens of extant and extinct animals, plants, fungi and microorganisms, including paleontological, archeozoological, anthropological and archeobotanical collections. In this definition, biomedical and veterinary-oriented collections are excluded.

Chapter 2   Types of funding and funding schemes

2.1   Funding principles

1. All projects have to demonstrate a clear and practical step forward towards nationwide interoperability of specimen data. In that respect, specimen conditioning/determination should be coupled with data mobilisation.
2. All data generated within these projects should be FAIR data, i.e. findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable (FAIR-principle) for anyone without restrictions while in full compliance with Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) regulations, following CARE principles for preserving indigenous-related data and if not protected by ethical clauses, by nature conservation regulations or international multilateral environmental agreements.
3. The collaborative projects that benefit from as well as enhance the network between institutions will be favored.
4. The matching fund principle applies for all financial contributions. The participating institutions must provide an overall contribution for each financed project (in cash and/or in kind) to, at least, match the funds provided by SwissCollNet. There are no restrictions in handling the distribution of in cash and/or in kind contributions between applicants of the same project. Excluded are organisations or companies delivering contributions based on service level agreements.
5. SwissCollNet is under no obligation to award a grant to any person or entity.

2.2   Types of projects

1. Projects for infrastructure implementation (e.g. the SVNHC).
2. Institutional or inter-institutional projects. Collaboration among natural history collection-holding institutions is highly recommended.

2.3   Funding schemes

SwissCollNet distinguishes between two funding schemes:

1. Service level agreements (Leistungsvereinbarungen);
2. Competitive calls for institutional or inter-institutional projects.

2.3.1   Service level agreements
For the implementation of the defined and nationally coordinated data infrastructure SVNHC, SwissCollNet will establish service level agreements comprising deliverables and a milestone-based payment mechanism.

In case of multi-year funding, the achievement of the defined milestones will be evaluated by the Steering Board on a yearly basis. The next payment will be released only if the planned milestones have been reached to a sufficient degree.

2.3.2   Competitive calls for project proposals
SwissCollNet will organise targeted calls for project proposals addressing technical and scientific challenges to reach the shareable data infrastructure goals and modernisation of natural history collections. The applications are open to the collection-holding institutions. The call contents will be based on the scope outlined in Chapter 1.

The proposals will be evaluated and prioritised by external experts bearing no conflict of interest. The funding decisions will be taken by the Steering Board and ratified by the Executive Board of the SCNAT (see Chapter 4).

2.3.3 SwissCollNet management costs

The SCNAT is in charge of the coordination to ensure the successful implementation of the SwissCollNet initiative. Management costs cover expenses of the Scientific Unit, communication (internal to the project and externally) as well as all general activities related to network development.

2.4 Available funding

A total budget of MCHF 12.37 is available for the period 2021–2024 and is distributed as described in the table below.[1] The amounts associated to each category may be shifted between categories if needed.

Table 1: Overview of fund allocation within SwissCollNet

Category	Description	Funding scheme	MCHF
SwissCollNet management	SB, BoE, office, symposia, workshops, communication		1.94
Infrastructure implementation projects	Projects dedicated to building a progressive, shareable data system, thereby enabling nationwide interoperability of specimen data of Swiss natural history collections (SVNHC).	Service level agreement	1.00
Collection conditioning	Projects aiming at conditioning, re-determining, and revising natural history collections.	Call for project proposals	3.25
Infrastructure development and data mobilisation	Projects aiming at enhancing specimen digitisation (databasing and/or imaging).	Call for project proposals	3.9
Training and education projects	Projects aiming at providing training opportunities for collection managers and taxonomic experts.	Call for project proposals	2.28

Chapter 3   Requirements for calls for project proposals

3.1 Eligibility criteria

1. Main and co-applicants are persons employed in a public and/or non-profit natural history collection-holding institutions located in Switzerland. Joint applications between institutions are encouraged.
2. SwissCollNet funds can only be provided to public and/or non-profit Swiss institutions. Institutions from the private sector or individual collections must cover their efforts with their own resources.

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[1] The annual budget decisions of the parliament remain reserved.

3.2   Setting up a collaboration

1. If a collaboration is foreseen in the proposal, the main applicant is responsible for setting it up.
2. Under certain circumstances (e.g. no Swiss research group or natural history collection-holding institution can provide the expected know-how), it is possible to include partners located in a foreign country. However, they cannot be funded directly.
3. SwissCollNet funds have to be mainly used by Swiss public and/or non-profit collection-holding institutions. Funds may be used for mandating the private sector for specific tasks that cannot be fulfilled by the applicant(s).

3.3   Funding duration and conditions

1. Engagements for approved projects may last for a maximal duration of 2 years. Cost-neutral extensions of projects may be attributed by the Steering Board upon request.
2. All projects have to be terminated by December 31st, 2024 at the latest.
3. Funds can only be allocated until October 31st, 2024.
4. The Steering Board will decide an overall award budget for each call and for each service level agreement.
5. The applying institution(s) is/are responsible for confirming its/their own contributions (in cash and/or in kind) to, at least, match the funds provided by SwissCollNet.

Chapter 4   Procedures

4.1   Competitive calls for institutional or inter-institutional projects

4.1.1   Project proposal pre-screening
1. All project proposals will be submitted to a formal check by the Scientific Unit.
2. Project proposals which fail to comply with the formal requirements will not be admitted to the next stage of the selection procedure and will be rejected if the defect cannot be easily corrected.
3. The following formal requirements must be met:
    – Compliance with the submission deadline;
    – Compliance with the official SCNAT mandate and the corresponding call for proposals;
    – Use of the official forms and completeness of the proposal (as specified in the corresponding call for project proposals), to be written in English;
    – Eligibility of the main applicant and co-applicant(s);
    – Confirmation of provision of own contributions (in cash and/or in-kind) in the case the proposal is approved for funding.
    – Acknowledgment of the data sharing principles.

4.1.2   Evaluation criteria for project proposals (competitive calls)
The quality of the submitted proposals will be evaluated by external experts based on several criteria, among which:

– Fit within the task list outlined in Chapter 1;
– Contribution to the implementation of a nationwide harmonisation and accessibility of specimen data from natural history collections
– Importance and relevance for research of the targeted collection(s)
– Quality of data
– Scientific quality
– Network development and knowledge transfer
– Human resources
– Feasibility and efficiency

– Financial quality

4.1.3 Funding decisions
1. The Steering Board will decide on funds allocated to the projects.
2. The Steering Board may issue recommendations to adapt a project and/or merge proposals to improve the adequacy with SwissCollNet objectives and/or improve budget efficiency.
3. The Executive Board of SCNAT will ratify the decisions taken by the Steering Board.
4. Upon approval, a contract (grant contract or service contract) will be established between SwissCollNet and successful applicants which will detail the following (see Chapter 5 and 6):
    – Total amount awarded (engagement) and funding duration;
    – Payment conditions;
    – Reporting obligations.

4.2 Infrastructure implementation projects (service level agreements)

Tenders for infrastructure implementation projects will be formulated by the Steering Board upon recommendations of the Board of Experts.

Tenders for infrastructure implementation projects will be selected according to the following criteria:

– Fit within the task list outlined in Chapter 1;
– Contributions to the implementation of open-access to nationwide harmonised specimen data;
– Integration of specimen data in a common system;
– Focus to the development of the necessary IT and data infrastructures to achieve nationwide data interoperability of specimen data;
– Financial planning in general and distribution of the funding.

1. Each service level agreement will feature an infrastructure implementation plan.
2. Infrastructure implementation plans will be reviewed by the Board of Experts, who will verify that the technical requirements defined in the report from SVNHC pre-project phase report are met.
3. The Board of Experts will submit recommendations to the Steering Board

4.3 Right of appeal

The main applicant may appeal against rulings issued by SCNAT at the Swiss Federal Administrative Court (according to the Federal Act on the Promotion of Research and Innovation (RIPA) article 13).

Chapter 5 Grants and grant management

5.1 Legal consequences of the award

1. On the full or partial approval of a grant application (award), the applicants become grantees of SwissCollNet.
2. Grantees are obliged:
    – to use the grant in accordance with the conditions set out in the ruling;
    – to comply with the provisions stipulated in these regulations and all other rules applicable to the grant.
3. The grantees must provide the Scientific Unit with a written summary of the planned project that is understandable to non-experts (lay summary). They must also provide thematic keywords for the SwissCollNet website.

4. The lay summary and keywords must be submitted upon receipt of the funding decision, but no later than upon submission of the release of funds request.

5.2   Changes to project proposals

Substantial changes to the work, tasks and milestones described in the project proposal and/or set by the Steering Board as conditions for financing may only be made if requested in writing and approved by the Scientific Unit.

5.3   Project withdrawal or termination

1. Applicants who withdraw their proposals or are forced to terminate it prematurely must inform the Scientific Unit in written form stating reasons.
2. Any unused funds must be reimbursed.

5.4   Amendment and revocation of the award

If the prerequisites for the award are no longer met after approval of the award or if the circumstances on which approval is based change considerably (e.g. milestones are not reached), SwissCollNet may amend or revoke the approved award and:

– if the grant has not yet been transferred, it may amend or withhold it;
– if the grant has already been transferred, it may demand partial or full repayment of the grant.

Prior to taking such measures, SwissCollNet will hear the parties concerned and communicate the amendment or revocation in the form of a ruling.

Chapter 6   Grant continuation, reporting and monitoring

6.1   Activity report

1. SwissCollNet grantees must submit an annual activity report to the Scientific Unit no later than 1 month after the end of the calendar year.
2. The following information must be included in the activity report:
   – summary;
   – main achievements and results;
   – next steps.

6.2   Financial report

1. An annual financial report is to be submitted with the activity report and must disclose the following:
   – Use of SwissCollNet funds;
   – Own contributions "in cash" and "in kind" by the involved partners.
2. Financial reports are compiled by the grant administration office (or equivalent administrative body) of the host institution. They must be reviewed, signed and sent to the Scientific Unit in a timely manner.
3. Financial reports must be submitted no later than 1 month after the end of the calendar year.

6.3   Funding continuation

1. The annual activity and financial reports will be reviewed by the Board of Experts.
2. Based on the progress made, the Board of Experts will submit a recommendation to the Steering Board.
3. The final decision on releasing the next payment is taken by the Steering Board and communicated by the Scientific Unit.
4. At the termination of the project, unused funds have to be reimbursed to SCNAT.

Chapter 7   Closing Provisions

These funding regulations were adopted by the Steering Board on July 1, 2021, validated by the Executive Board SCNAT on 27.08.2021 and approved by the SERI on 30.08.2021.