# “5 per Mille” CALL FOR PROPOSALS 2026

## From Tumor Complexity to Precision Oncology

**DEADLINE FOR PRE-SUBMISSION: MARCH 10, 2026**

**DEADLINE FOR FULL PROPOSAL: JUNE 30, 2026**

(BY 17:00 CENTRAL EUROPEAN TIME)

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Guide to proposal preparation, FEA instructions, Eligible costs and Keywords are available at: https://www.direzionescientifica.airc.it/funding-for-research/multiunit-reasearch/

# Foreword

Cancer is a complex disease. The complexity arises from the interplay of genetic mutations, epigenetic changes, and environmental influences that shape the tumor and its microenvironment and vary between different types of cancer and among patients as well as within a single tumor. This heterogeneity makes diagnosis, prognosis, and therapy highly challenging, necessitating personalized and multi-disciplinary approaches to effectively manage and treat the disease. Recent technological advances have accelerated the understanding of such complexity, opening the way to personalized approaches.

To accelerate interdisciplinary collaboration across Italian institutions and tackle unmet translational challenges and clinical needs, Fondazione AIRC per la Ricerca sul Cancro ETS (AIRC) has launched special initiatives funded by the "5 per mille" tax designation program. Building on the success of previous "5 per mille" Programs, AIRC is now launching a new Call dedicated to deciphering **the tumor ecosystem, its biology and complexity** to advance **precision oncology approaches** for the benefit of patients.

The goal of this Call is to generate or exploit insights that inform the rational design of innovative precision medicine approaches (including diagnostic, prognostic and therapeutic applications). Fondazione AIRC seeks to support research efforts that integrate molecular and cellular understanding with spatial and systems-level analyses to more accurately elucidate pathways underlying tumor progression, immune evasion, and drug resistance.

Proposals should tackle **the most urgent clinical needs**, including cancers with limited diagnostic or therapeutic options, those associated with high mortality rates ("big killers"), or recurrent/refractory tumors. Proposals should integrate **comprehensive mechanistic studies** with a clear trajectory towards clinical impact, spanning diagnostic innovation and therapeutic development in real-world oncology settings. Ultimately, these efforts should drive precision oncology approaches that are both biologically informed and clinically actionable, and **set the basis for further research**.

Planned activities are expected to represent the cutting edge of technological innovation and to require interdisciplinary and complementary expertise within the research team. Activities should be structured along a « bench-to-bedside» continuum, with tangible plans for clinical implementation i.e. initiating clinical trials, integrating discoveries into diagnostic workflows, or establishing new therapeutic strategies. Such evidence of translational potential will be considered a key criterion for funding.

Fondazione AIRC also recognizes the importance of fostering innovation through **high-risk, high-gain activities** dedicated to supporting hypothesis-driven, bold leading-edge approaches. AIRC encourages consortia to welcome **young promising investigators to lead such activities**, ensuring their full integration into the program with appropriate resources and mentorship. Such activities should clearly state the innovative nature of the research, the underlying hypothesis, anticipated impact, and risk mitigation within their application.

Successful applications could be funded for up to 6 years with a yearly assessment of progress and a mid-term interview at year 3. According to the outcome of year 3 assessment, programs might be further evaluated in subsequent years by a Scientific Review panel via the submission of a detailed progress report. Applicants should be aware that renewal will be granted upon accomplishment of anticipated milestones and funding will be granted only to those programs ensuring clinical translation of reported discoveries. Funding beyond year 3—and subsequently beyond year 4—will be contingent upon positive evaluations.

The **budget allocated for this initiative is in the range of € 10 million/year**, the number of funded programs will depend on the ranking established by peer review and the evaluation of budget requests.

# 1. How to Apply

The Call foresees a three-step selection process. Applicants must first submit a **pre-submission enquiry** comprising a Letter of Intent (LOI), and a detailed team description, including the bio sketches of the team leader (hereafter referred to as **Principal Investigator** (**PI),** and co-investigators acting as **Group Leaders (GL)**. Pre-submission enquiries will be evaluated by an ad-hoc appointed Scientific Review Panel composed of renowned international experts with complementary expertise in precision oncology research. Teams whose pre-submissions are ranked as most competitive will be invited to submit a **full proposal.** Following review, shortlisted PIs will be invited for a final interview before a dedicated Study Section.

# 2. Eligibility Criteria

## 2.1 Applicants

Proposals must be structured under the coordination of a **PI** and include the participation of **GLs** with complementary and interdisciplinary expertise relevant to the specific application. The PI and GLs (**Program members**) must be affiliated with and operate within Italian Hosting Institution(s) throughout the duration of the entire proposed program. The PI will be responsible for the management of scientific and administrative activities for the entire duration of the grant.

**PIs and GLs** may hold more than one academic affiliation, provided they meet the requirement for substantial presence in Italy—*i.e.*, spending at least 50% of their time in the country. Official documentation confirming substantial presence will be required from all institutions with which the PIs and the GLs are affiliated. Applicants who do not meet this requirement will be deemed ineligible. GLs are intended to be investigators with an established and autonomous research team.

Team's size should be commensurate with the proposed activities and enable close interaction among program members and efficient management of resources. A **program manager** (PM) will be required and will ensure day-to-day program coordination and active communication within the team, working in close collaboration with the PI and GLs. He/She will be responsible for communication with AIRC. The PM will

support the program and be responsible for developing scientific reports and budgets, milestone and deliverable tracking, and financial reviews.
Current recipients of an AIRC individual grant may apply to this Call either as Principal Investigator (PI) or Group Leader (GL), provided that the proposed program has no or minimal overlap. Applicants participating in this Call as Principal Investigators (PIs) are not permitted to act as Group Leaders in other consortia within this Call. Acting as Group Leader in multiple applications is discouraged. Budget requests and time allocation will be carefully reviewed. PIs must dedicate at least 30% of their effort to the program, while GLs are required to commit a minimum of 20% when their research unit is funded. Appropriate effort (≥ 50%) should be assigned to the PM.
Current PIs of an active AIRC Multi-unit grant cannot apply to this Call as a PI or a GL unless the overlapping funding period on the programs is less than six months.

## 2.2 Hosting Institutions

**The Call is open to proposals from both single and multiple Institutions,** according to the needs of the proposed research. Program members must operate in Italian Hosting Institution(s), *i.e.* a research organization (such as university, hospital or other research center), irrespective of their legal status (organized under public or private law), whose primary goals are to conduct independent non-economic biomedical research and are committed to disseminate research results. Research organizations, by definition, must completely reinvest possible revenues coming from non-economic research activity in the non-economic research activities. Hosting Institutions must promote the highest standards of integrity in research, in compliance with the AIRC policy on research integrity

## 2.3 Research Plan

Programs must be interdisciplinary and require a collaborative approach. Proposed activities should aim to address the evolving cancer landscape, focusing on understanding tumor heterogeneity and vulnerability.

The research plan should adopt a translational approach—encompassing diagnostic, prognostic and/or therapeutic goals—and be clearly directed toward a common objective, rather than reflecting a collection of individual activities. Proposals should target specific cancer types and/or defined patient sub-groups. Achievable milestones and deliverables should be outlined for the major goals, aligned with clinical translation and implementation plans.

AIRC has interest in the following cancer research areas, although this focus is not exclusive, and proposals outside these areas will also be considered, provided they align with AIRC's mission and scientific priorities:

- Personalized therapeutic strategies for rare and difficult-to-treat cancers: development of clinical trials using molecular profiling to match patients with tailored therapies
- Expansion of Immunotherapy and Precision Medicine Approaches: Identification of novel immune-related biomarkers and development of personalized immunotherapy regimens

- Integration of Artificial Intelligence in Biomarker Discovery and Patient Stratification: Use of AI and advanced analytics to analyze large-scale omics data.

Despite the broad scope of this Call, the following proposals will not be eligible for this funding scheme:

- Proposals centered around a single lab project;
- Basic research-proposals, i.e. lacking a translational application of the proposed research within the funding period;
- Clinical research-only proposals, without innovative laboratory, research-based components;
- Translational Proposals including Phase III or IV clinical trials;
- Generic «brain gain» programs, *e.g.* programs aimed at recruiting Italian or International scientists within the Hosting Institution, unless recruitment is instrumental to the proposed research;
- Non-hypothesis-driven or generic proposals lacking measurable outputs;
- «Core» funding for enabling basic or clinical institutional research activities;
- Open-ended research programs unlikely to be realistically concluded within the funding period;

All proposals must include appropriate provisions for study design, statistical analysis, and sample size. Documentation of approval/s from competent authorities are mandatory for all studies involving human subjects, human biological samples, and experimental animal experimentation. AIRC reserves the right to monitor compliance with these requirements during and after the funding period. AIRC accepts no liability for harm to participants enrolled in AIRC-funded clinical trials.

Proposals for clinical studies that are property of companies producing drugs or diagnostic tools and that receive economic support from such companies will not be accepted. Drug supply and economic support from companies do not preclude AIRC evaluation, provided that the PIs have the full property of data and results, and that companies have no right to veto the publication of results anytime. A statement that the management of the study, data acquisition and analysis and data property are completely independent of any company producing/marketing drugs or diagnostic tools or with any type of economic interest in the study must be included in the application, together with the indication on whether the company provides its product(s) to the PI for free or not. Projects will not be funded without such information.

Should the program foresee the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools to support data analysis and enhance research workflows, the adoption of such technologies must always respect intellectual property rights. Any content entered into AI systems, as well as any output they generate, should not endanger the ownership, confidentiality, or legal protection of proprietary information. It is therefore essential to implement appropriate safeguards to ensure that the use of AI does not inadvertently expose confidential knowledge, unpublished results, or protected materials, thus preserving the integrity and protection of the project's intellectual assets.

Resources generated through research programs – such as biospecimens or datasets – are expected to become shared assets of the AIRC Scientific Community. The PI, GLs and the Hosting institutions shall commit to open science and FAIR principles and to the AIRC Biospecimens and Data Governance Policy as determined at the time of full submission. Full submission must provide a sustainability plan describing how these resources will be implemented and maintained beyond the funding period (for example, through incorporation and continued support by the Hosting Institution, or additional fundings).

**The proposal must be original**. Scientific overlap with other AIRC applications must be fully disclosed and justified in the "Declaration on originality of the application form.
AIRC verifies documents with anti-plagiarism software. AIRC is aware that copying may be accidental and that parts of an application (*e.g.,* materials and methods) may include duplicate material, originally produced by the PI for other goals than the present application. Nevertheless, **proposals that contain blatantly and substantially copied materials originally presented by other PIs will be rejected** (for details, please see the form "Declaration on originality of the application" in the appropriate section of the Guide to proposal preparation).

# 3. Intellectual Property, exploitation and dissemination of results

With the purpose of ensuring that the research funded by AIRC has the best chances to result in new medical interventions for patients (i.e., new therapeutic or diagnostic processes), when outcomes of research programs are candidates for practical exploitation, the recipient Hosting Institution shall comply with the following principles:

- Intellectual property and patents resulting from research funded wholly or partly by AIRC will be solely owned and managed by the Grantee and Hosting Institution.
- The Hosting Institution shall use its best efforts to ensure proper protection, under applicable intellectual property laws, to research results that show therapeutic or diagnostic potential irrespective of whether the research was funded wholly or partly by AIRC. In such cases, the Hosting Institution shall ensure adequate and prompt action both for timely protection and subsequent exploitation;
- Intellectual property and patents resulting from research carried out with AIRC grants will be solely owned and managed by the grantee and the Hosting Institution.
- The Hosting Institution, through its Legal Representative or a designated individual (i.e., Tech Transfer Officer, Principal Investigator, or Program Manager) shall inform AIRC in writing of any new results undergoing intellectual property protection (including, *inter alia*, patent filings or patent applications, utility models, registered designs, trademarks, copyright registrations, etc.) and of any valorization initiative, such as licensing agreements, spin-off formation, or any other forms/types of potential commercial exploitation of such results. Whenever these activities fall within the duration

of a funding period, relevant notice shall be given *via* the administrative annual report. Otherwise, such notice shall be given within 10 working days *via* registered letter with return receipt or PEC addressed to airc.direzione-scientifica@pec.it;

- Subject to requirements necessary to ensure effective patent protection, the Hosting Institution shall use its best effort to disseminate research results though scientific publications and shall duly acknowledge funding by AIRC;
- In addition to scientific publications, funding from AIRC shall be given prominent notice, whenever possible, in all forms of public dissemination of news concerning the funded research;
- Unless otherwise agreed in specific agreements with AIRC, the results of research funded by AIRC must be primarily directed towards generating scientific and medical progress. In the ultimate interest of patients, this shall ensure valorisation processes that maximize the impact of new medical interventions (i.e., distribution of new diagnostic and therapeutic processes). The Hosting Institution shall promptly inform AIRC in writing about any royalties and/or revenues deriving from the results of AIRC's supported activities, it being understood that such royalties and/or revenues shall be reinvested in independent, non-profit oncological research;
- The Hosting institution and the eventual consortium agreements in any form shall incorporate by reference the Biospecimens and Data Governance Policy (BDGP).

At any time during regular business hours and upon at least 5 working days prior written notice, AIRC shall have the right to (i) monitor all funded institution's intellectual property-related activities, either directly or through a third party independent expert bound to confidentiality, and (ii) require the Hosting Institution to enter into an appropriate revenue sharing agreement, to be discussed on a case-by-case basis, should the funded institution enter into any valorization agreement with third parties.

AIRC shall further have the right to adopt any measure or start with any legal action it deems necessary or appropriate to safeguard, protect, or enforce its rights and legitimate interests.

All funded initiatives shall strictly and fully comply with AIRC's intellectual property policy principles, as in force and as may be amended from time to time, and the funded institution shall be bound to implement, without delay or exception, any requirement, guideline, or modification arising therefrom.

# 4. Partnership and Governance

In the full submission, a partnership plan addressing the following issues must be in place:

- **Governance and organizational structure of the team**: a deputy-PI, a Program Manager and a steering committee must be appointed. The steering committee must include the PI (chairman), the deputy-PI and selected Group Leaders; the role of this committee is to assist the PI in overseeing the program, for example by proposing solutions to manage changes in the proposed plan or conflicts between participants. Consistent with the partnership requirements of the Call, each participating unit

(led by a Group Leader) contributes unique and complementary expertise. Governance mechanisms include: defined roles and responsibilities for each unit, shared work plans and GANTT alignment, regular cross-unit scientific exchanges, integration of data management, IP agreement frameworks, and ethical compliance processes. The PM will assist the team in coordinating activities of the research consortium, ensures compliance with award requirements, oversees financial distribution; facilitate communication within and outside the consortium; ensure relationships with AIRC representatives and organize outreach activities, help manage intellectual property, assist preparation of reports, reviews and meetings;

- **Advisory board**: the PI must create an external advisory committee of 2 to 4 scientists working outside of Italy; they will monitor the program, providing independent feedback and recommendations;
- **Progress Reports and Retreats**: the PI must organize regular meetings (in person or virtual) with all members of the team, to ensure research efforts and outcomes are shared. In addition, a kick-off meeting and yearly in person retreats with all program members, the advisory board and AIRC representatives should be envisaged at start of the activities and before submitting renewal requests. AIRC requests that the advisory board write a report at the end of each meeting to be included in next renewal request, and that research plans will be accordingly adapted before renewal request:
- **Biospecimens and Data Governance Policy implementation plan**;
- **Incidental finding policy**
- **Policy on Data management and sharing**;
- **Procedures for resolving conflicts**;
- **Intellectual property:** an agreement between the PI, all GLs and their Hosting Institutions about the intellectual property of data obtained through this funding scheme must be in place before the start of the grant;
- **Patients' Relationship:** where useful to the outcome of the clinical activity, patients representatives involvement will be highly valued.

AIRC reserves the right to ask for additional information or improvements at the time of funding.

# 5. Disclosure of Financial Conflict of Interests

In the full submission, PIs and GLs are required to disclose any financial conflict of interest with the proposal as described in the AIRC policy on Financial conflicts of interest. Reviewers will be asked to determine if the conflicts declared may affect the objectivity and integrity of the proposed research plan. Appropriate measures will be taken against applicants who have deliberately or recklessly failed to disclose conflicts of interest, including: the termination of the grant, the obligation to return grant money to AIRC, the ineligibility to apply to future AIRC grants and the exclusion from AIRC review panels and other bodies.

# 6. Funding

Approved applications will receive "5 per Mille" funding for up to six years, contingent on regular progress reports and scientific merit during evaluations. The allocated budget will be communicated directly to the PI, who will be the sole person responsible for its year-by-year allocation to Group Leaders. Budget allocation to each Group Leader will have to be indicated in each renewal request for AIRC to directly fund the hosting Institutions. **AIRC will closely monitor both the scientific progress and the administrative handling of the grants.**
Financial support may be requested for different expense categories, including:

- personnel (for the duration of the program);
- direct research costs (consumables, services… as detailed in Eligible costs guideline);
- instruments, including technological platforms deemed necessary for the program. The acquisition of new platforms will be carefully evaluated during the reviewing process;
- indirect costs and overheads.

**First year of funding.** Upon approval and grant assignment to PI and GLs, funds will be made available to the Hosting Institutions under AIRC terms and conditions. Hosting Institution will ensure funds must be at the grantee's disposal within 30 days of receipt. PIs and Program Managers will ensure budget allocation to each GL.

**Every year** the PI must:

- submit two brief progress reports every six months authorizing the payment to each research unit. AIRC will disburse funds in six-month instalments;
- organize a retreat with all program members, the advisory board and AIRC representatives. Following the retreat the advisory board must prepare a report to be included in the renewal request;
- submit a renewal request incorporating the recommendations provided by the advisory board during the retreat. GLs are also required to contribute to the renewal request;
- submit a report on the implementation of the Biospecimens and Data Governance Policy implementation plan;
- submit an administrative report within three months of the end of each funding year.

The reports above should describe the progress towards specific milestone achievement. Funds will be released only upon endorsement by the advisory board and formal approval of the aforementioned documents by AIRC.

Annual renewal of awarded grants will be subject to the outcome of the scientific evaluation and contingent upon the availability of funds, which depend on the net proceeds from the "5 per Mille" contributions allocated by the competent Ministries. Any note or need to refine or pivot the research plan based on

unanticipated findings or new clinical insights should be included in this document taking into account also the recommendations by the advisory board members.

**Year 3** a mid-term interview in the presence of a Scientific Review Panel will be set up. This, together with the evaluation of a detailed progress report will determine the outcome of the review.

According to the outcome of year 3, Programs might be further evaluated in next years by a scientific Review panel via the submission of a detailed progress report.

Only those programs providing evidence for prospective translational or clinical implementation of projected activities and deemed competitive for additional support will continue to be funded.

Transfer of grant money to other laboratories either in Italy or abroad is not allowed.

Further information about grant terms and conditions, renewal requests, and scientific and administrative reports, will be provided upon application approval.
**Please note that, after the awarding of a grant, AIRC reserves the right to site visit the PI and GLs laboratories and the Hosting Institutions as well as to audit the administrative management of the program at any time and up to 10 years after the program is concluded, at any time.**

Information about the proposed research (name of the PI, title and abstract), if funded, will be published on AIRC journals and websites, the websites of potential co-funders also contributing to the funding scheme, and other public databases collecting data on national and international funding in cancer research, such as ICRP (International Cancer Research Partnership), in the full respect of the EU General Regulation 2016/679 on data protection.

# 7. The Review Process

## 7.1 Eligibility

All applications undergo an initial administrative review to verify compliance with the program's guidelines and eligibility criteria. Applications that do not meet these requirements will be excluded from further consideration. Those deemed eligible proceed to a peer review process, which ensures a fair, independent, and expert assessment of their scientific merit. Only the highest-quality proposals, identified through this rigorous and objective evaluation, will be selected for funding.

## 7.2 LOI evaluation

AIRC has appointed a Scientific Review Panel of international experts to oversee the review process, including LOI evaluation. Study Section members assess each LOI using the criteria below and recommend whether

applicants should be invited to submit full proposals. All applicants will be notified of their evaluation results.

## 7.3 Full proposal evaluation

Full proposals are independently reviewed by at least three members of the Scientific Review Panel serving as *primary reviewer*, *secondary reviewer* or *discussant*. If needed, the primary reviewer may invite one or more *reviewer specialists*, if the panel's expertise is insufficient. Each Scientific Review Panel member (and not appointed specialists) assigns a score.

The review criteria are:

- Alignment with Call objectives
- Strategic alignment and scientific synergy across the consortium partners (program management structure will be considered)
- Research program innovation and quality (including caveats and contingency plans)
- Strength of proponents and network
- Institutional quality
- Feasibility of the program and team's expertise
- Measurable translational or clinical impact
- Effect on patients' quality of life and survivorship
- Influence on clinic operations, training, and technological innovation

Proposals must be **mechanism-based and hypothesis-**driven and evaluated solely for excellence. Among equally outstanding submissions, AIRC will prioritize those enrolling **physician scientists** dedicated to the program. After reviews, applications are ranked by scientific merit using the average preliminary score from three reviewers. Proposals are then discussed during the plenary Study Section, and final rankings are based on the average of all reviewers' scores collected during the session.

## 7.4 Interview

Based on the preliminary ranking, shortlisted PIs will be invited to an in-person interview on November 11, 2026 (details on the location will be provided). All PIs are requested to hold this date; all candidates will be notified by September 30. The interview will include a short presentation followed by Q&A with the members of the committee. Further details will be provided for the shortlisted candidates. The final ranking, which is based on the final score of each application, is calculated as the mean of the scores received from all reviewers during the discussion.
The final ranking and the financial availability of AIRC will determine the recommendation for funding, to be endorsed by the AIRC Board of Directors (Consiglio di Amministrazione).

At each review stage, reviewer assignments will comply with conflict of interest rules to ensure impartiality. By agreeing to evaluate an application, reviewers commit to maintaining confidentiality of all related

materials. The AIRC policy on conflict of interest is available in our website.

All applicants will be notified of the final decision on their application with an official communication from AIRC (the notification date is reported in the "Deadlines" table) and will have access to the reviewers' comments. The identity of the reviewers will not be disclosed. **The decision concerning the funding of an application cannot be appealed.**

# 8. Deadlines

**Deadlines are strictly enforced: applications submitted after the deadline will not be accepted.**

**Deadlines for applications** (by 17:00 Central European Time, of the indicated dates).

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| Pre-submission enquiry (Letter Of Intent) | Publication of Call and online form release | January 30, 2026 |
| | **Electronic submission deadline** | **March 10, 2026** |
| | Digitally signed submission deadline | March 24, 2026 |
| | Notification of results | May 15 2026 |
| Full Proposals (if pre-submission approved) | **Electronic submission deadline** | **June 30, 2026** |
| | Digitally signed submission deadline | July 10, 2026 |
| | Papers in press (*) | September 15, 2026 |
| | Interview | November 11, 2026 |
| | Notification of results | December 21, 2026 |
| | Start of grants | January 2, 2027 |

(*) Communications regarding these papers will be forwarded to all reviewers evaluating the full proposal.

**For pre submission:** The PI and the Legal Representative must digitally sign the presubmission proposal: refer to the FEA instructions ("Firma Elettronica Avanzata") for details. If the digitally signed applications are not submitted by the indicated deadline, they will not be sent out for review.

**For full proposals**: The PI, each GL and the Legal Representatives must digitally sign the full proposal: refer to the FEA instructions ("Firma Elettronica Avanzata") for details. If the digitally signed applications are not submitted by the indicated deadline, they will not be sent out for review.
In case of award, the deadlines for renewal requests, administrative and scientific reports will be communicated in the award letter.