

# Watt's Happening?

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## CO-OPERATIVES: *the quiet revolution*



*A solar farm like this one, 12,000 solar panels on 15 hectares (37 acres) may soon be a reality in the Peace Country thanks to the efforts of a local renewable energy cooperative, Peace Energy Co-op based*

*in Dawson Creek. If successful, it will be western Canada's grid-scale solar farm financed, owned and operated by a cooperative.*

I push my cart down the aisle and pick up a few groceries. Grab a coffee and say howdy to some familiar faces. Stop at the gas bar, fill my tank and buy a magazine. Cross the street to the credit union to pay a few bills and pick up some cash.

Just going about my day-to-day affairs, but each of my actions expresses a fundamentally different way of looking at the world. It is the way of the cooperative.

The Dawson Co-op Union is a food and materials cooperative, credit unions are financial cooperatives, and Peace Energy Co-op (who sponsors this column) is a renewable energy

investment cooperative.

There are also worker cooperatives where the employees own and democratically govern their own businesses, and there are producer cooperatives where farmers and others band together to market their products. It's a remarkably versatile business model.

### CO-OPS ARE DIFFERENT

Co-ops are profit-making entities, but they are not profit maximizing. In other words, it's a model designed to serve customers and workers, not take as much profit from them as possible. And it

does not funnel wealth up to the top, but rather distributes it evenly among its members.

Cooperatives are intensely democratic, governed from the bottom up, not from the top down: each member has one and only one vote. Co-ops are designed to serve not just their members but also their communities, and often have a clear commitment to the environment and principles like “fair trade.”

### **CO-OPS ARE BIG**

Even though it has grown side-by-side with the corporate economy for some two hundred years, few people realize the size and scope of this distinctly different economic model.

How big is the co-op movement today? The numbers are impressive: 3 million cooperatives worldwide with 1.2 billion members (that’s 12% of all the people on Earth) employing 280 million people, and within the G20 nations, accounting for 12 percent of all jobs, with annual revenues of over US \$3 trillion.

### **CO-OPS ARE ENERGY**

Renewable energy co-ops are new to Canada but growing in number. Toronto Renewable Energy Co-op (TREC), was Canada’s first, and Dawson Creek’s Peace Energy Cooperative was the second in Canada and the first in western Canada.

A national conference in Ottawa last May (at which reps from Peace Energy Co-op presented) spearheaded the creation of a renewable energy “league” that will bring all of Canada’s renewable energy co-ops under one umbrella organization: co-ops helping co-ops grow and prosper, sharing resources and experience.

Renewable energy lends itself to the cooperative model of distributed local ownership, because renewable energy itself tends to be distributed and local. The old-fashioned conventional energy sources tend to rely on

massive, centralized generating facilities from which electricity is then sold to the masses. Renewables like solar and wind power tend to be distributed over wide areas: the sun shines on my roof and the wind blows across my neighbourhood as well as yours.

With a solar array on your roof you can now become an energy producer, not just a consumer, and over time that can save you a lot of money on your electrical bills. Western Canada’s first cooperatively financed, owned and operated solar farm is also about to become a reality in the Peace Country too, thanks to the efforts of Peace Energy Co-op. To find out more check out their website at [peaceenergy.ca](http://peaceenergy.ca).

### **CLEAN ENERGY CO-OPS IN EUROPE**

Germany provides a good case study on how cooperatives can provide a rapid rise in the growth of distributed clean energy. Today, roughly half of Germany’s renewable energy facilities are in the hands of farmers, citizen groups, and almost one thousand cooperatives.

Like the clean energy they produce, the profits from these co-ops are distributed to local owner/members and their communities, not sucked out of the country by foreign investors. There are now 1.4 million solar power installations and 29,000 on-shore wind turbines owned locally in Germany, creating over 400,000 jobs.

### **CO-OPS DISTRIBUTE WEALTH**

Co-ops not only help to decentralize energy production (increasing climate change resilience) but also political power and, of course, wealth.

Finding a method of distributing wealth instead of collecting it in the hands of the top one percent is proving to be one of the most critical and difficult problems of our troubled times. Co-ops of all kinds are helping.

