

2021 Oklahoma Youth Tour Update
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For more than 50 years, Oklahoma's electric cooperatives have been sponsoring a group of deserving high school students for a life-changing, week-long educational trip to Washington, D.C. This experience is called "Youth Tour." The tradition began in 1964, with the purpose of developing today's youth into future leaders through an up-close, personal tour of our nation's capital. The youth leaders visit historical monuments, poignant memorials and significant sights throughout the week, as well as learn about the political process through personal interactions with their elected officials during a visit to Capitol Hill.

While in our nation's capital, Oklahoma students join forces with similar groups of developing young leaders through activities coordinated by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA). The first coordinated Youth Tour featured approximately 400 participants, representing 12 states. Over the years, Youth Tour has grown to nearly 2,000 students participating each summer, representing 44 states.

That first year, Oklahoma's delegation included 35 students. In recent years, Oklahoma's delegation has grown to approximately 75 students, sponsored by rural electric cooperatives across the state. To date, nearly 3,100 Oklahomans have experienced Youth Tour as young leaders. Numerous adults have served as chaperones and leaders over the years.

In 2020, those numbers came to an unexpected halt. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly impacted travel and large gatherings of individuals. No area of life was uninterrupted. As with most planned events, a decision to cancel 2020 Youth Tour was inevitable and officially declared.

At that time, program coordinators were hopeful the traditional trip would resume in 2021. Contracts and agreements were reassigned to the next year in preparation for a return of normal operations and activities. However, despite the best efforts to accommodate the needs of such an endeavor, it has become obvious that such a large-scale, coordinated event is nearly impossible to successfully and safely execute with copious undetermined factors or outcomes.

In addition, making the decision to cancel with advanced notice avoids extreme cancellation terms and elevated fees. Prevention of these financial obligations gives cooperatives and coordinators the ability to recognize and reward the 2021 Oklahoma Youth Tour student leader delegation with an alternate award. Students selected for 2021 Oklahoma Youth Tour will also be eligible for the Youth Leadership Council and other scholarships (up to \$5,000!).

A condensed youth leadership opportunity is being developed for 2021 Oklahoma Youth Tour students. This conference is tentatively planned for June 18-20 and will be held in-person or virtually, depending on restrictions and guidelines set by the CDC and local leadership. A decision will be made no later than mid-March. This conference will focus on individual growth development and networking for youth leaders across the state, as well as feature impactful speakers and presenters.

Commitment to community is a core principle of cooperatives. Youth programs, including Youth Tour, has been and will continue to be a priority in developing tomorrow's leaders. Electric cooperatives are operating with safety and flexibility in mind. Your understanding and patience is greatly appreciated during these uncertain times.

