

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2015*

**Remarks at Kotzebue Middle High School in Kotzebue, Alaska**  
*September 2, 2015*

*The President.* Hello, Alaska! Hello, Kotzebue! Go Huskies! Thank you so much! Thank you for that wonderful, wonderful reception. Please give Millie a big round of applause for the great job.

Everybody, have a seat. Have a seat. Just relax. I'm going to be here for a while.  
[*Laughter*]

Well, it is wonderful to be in Alaska. And I look forward to spending some quality time here. And I've gotten such a wonderful welcome all across the State, so I want to thank all of you. Thanks to the mayor of the Northwest Arctic Borough, Reggie Joule. Where's Reggie? Reggie, right here. Your mayor, Maija Lukin. I want to acknowledge the presence of our Lieutenant Governor here—thank you so much, Byron Mallott. And all of you for the warm Inupiaq reception here in Kotzebue. We are so grateful. Thank you.

*Audience member.* [*Inaudible*]

*The President.* I think that's a good thing, whatever happened right here. [*Laughter*]  
When you're President, you never know. [*Laughter*] Sometimes, you get some hecklers.  
[*Laughter*]

I did have my team look into what other Presidents have done when they visited Alaska. I'm not the first President to come to Alaska. Warren Harding spent more than 2 weeks here, which I would love to do. But I can't leave Congress alone that long. [*Laughter*] Something might happen. When FDR visited—Franklin Delano Roosevelt—his opponents started a rumor that he left his dog Fala on the Aleutian Islands and spent 20 million taxpayer dollars to send a destroyer to pick him up. Now, I'm astonished that anybody would make something up about a President. [*Laughter*] But FDR did not take it lying down. He said: "I don't resent attacks, and my family doesn't resent attacks. But Fala does resent attacks. He's not been the same dog since." [*Laughter*]

President Carter did some fishing when he visited. And I wouldn't mind coming back to Alaska to do some fly fishing someday. You cannot see Alaska in 3 days. It's too big. It's too vast. It's too diverse. So I'm going to have to come back. I may not be President anymore, but hopefully, I still get a pretty good reception. I'm going to—the—[*applause*]. And just in case, I'll bring Michelle, who I know will get a good reception.

In fact, on Monday, Governor Walker and Byron personally gave me a fishing license. Thank you, Lieutenant Governor. I think it expires, though, pretty quick, and I haven't gotten out there yet. [*Laughter*]

But there's one thing no American President has done before, and that's travel above the Arctic Circle. So I couldn't be prouder to be the first and to spend some time with all of you.

Before I begin my remarks, I want to thank our veterans who are in the audience, because we have so many Alaska Natives who serve our country and defend us. And in fact, I've met some World War II vets and Korean war vets. And we want to make sure that they know how much we appreciate everything that they've done on our behalf. So we appreciate them very much.

And I want to thank everybody in Kotzebue for something else, which is taking such good care of my team over the past week. I know that when I come to town there are a lot of people who come first, and it's a big footprint. But all of them have told me incredible stories of your kindness. I heard that you stuffed them full of all kinds of meat at Cariboufest. [Laughter] John Baker, who was the winner of the 2011 Iditarod, let them play with his Husky puppies. I heard about offers to go berry picking on the tundra, last night's cultural night. And I heard that you're even teaching them some Iñupiaq. I don't know how good they are. [Laughter] They're probably a little better than me. But the teams that advance my trip, they spend a lot of time far away from home. They do great work. Most of them are really young people. So I just want to say thank you to all of you for making them feel so at home even when they're 4,000 miles away.

So I've had a great week here in Alaska. Flying in on Monday, I had the view of something extraordinary from Air Force One: "the Great One," Denali. We restored its Alaska Native name. I know that it's been a long time coming for Alaskans. I've had a chance to sit in the cockpit of a floatplane. But the Secret Service didn't let me fly it. [Laughter] I still enjoyed it. We had a chance to hike to the Exit Glacier in Kenai Fjords National Park. I went out on Resurrection Bay and saw dolphins and a humpback whale and otters and puffins.

And in Dillingham, just earlier today, I watched Alaska Native fishermen bring in their salmon catch and a tribal elder prepare it in the traditional way. I had a chance to visit a middle school where Alaska Native youth performed a traditional Yup'ik dance. And I participated. It's on video.

So the warmth and hospitality has been incredible, and I'm so grateful for it.

We talk a lot about the pioneering, independent spirit of America. It's something that we're very proud of as Americans. But what's clear is that, up here, it's not just a spirit, it's not just a slogan, it's a way of life. The—and it is out of necessity. You've got to be self-reliant up here. You can't just drive down to the shopping mall to get what you need. Help, if you need it, is a long way away. This far north, everybody has to look out for each other. And even with all those efforts, there's still isolation, and there's poverty, and it can be harsh.

And that means that you depend on each other. It makes family and community and tradition all the more important. Now, I grew up in Hawaii, which obviously, the weather is a little different. [Laughter] But there's a similarity, what's called the Aloha spirit there. And I know you have the same spirit here, the notion that we're all in this together. And that's all the more profound in a place above the Arctic Circle.

We know that Alaska is big, and sometimes, I have to describe for people in the lower 48, if you dropped it on the lower 48, it would stretch from Florida to California, from the Dakotas to Texas. That's how big it is. So the people of Alaska can be just as different as all the differences that exist across America. But even though we all look different and come from different places and believe in different things, we all stand united around some similar values. We all want a chance at opportunity. We all want to be able to pass down our traditions and our culture and our language to our kids. We all want the same chance at the American Dream as everybody else.

We believe that every community deserves access to great jobs. And that's why, to boost commerce in the Arctic and to maintain America's status as an Arctic power, we've called for the accelerated replacement of the Coast Guard's heavy-duty icebreaker, and we're planning for construction of more icebreakers. And I'm urging Congress to make sure we've got the

resources to do this. To boost tourism, I'm asking Congress to speed up maintenance and modernization of our national parks in time for the centennial next year, including right here in Alaska.

We believe every child deserves a shot at a great education. One of the initiatives I'm proudest of is something we call ConnectEd, and it's a program we started to close the technology gaps in our schools and connect 99 percent of America's students to high-speed Internet by the year 2018. And if you want to see the difference this can make in a child's life, look at Nanwalek, on Alaska's southern coast. It is remote. Like a lot of Alaskan communities, you can only get there by boat or by plane. But today, with the help of Apple, all 80 of its students, most of whom are Native—Alaska Natives, now learn in classrooms with fast Internet and iPads and digital content. Most of these kids don't have Internet at home. But in the classroom, they've got the tools to compete with any child around the world.

And I know you're taking advantage of this program here in Kotzebue, with wireless Internet and 3-D printing. And that's great, because that's what we want for all these kids. We want nothing less than the best. And as President, one of the reasons I'm here is to tell you that I'm behind those efforts. I want to make sure these young people know we care about them and we're fighting for them.

We believe every American deserves access to quality, affordable health care. And since I signed the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare—[laughter]—we signed it 5½ years ago—since then, 16 million Americans have gotten covered. More than 18,000 Alaskans have been able to purchase private plans through healthcare.gov. Thanks to the leadership of Governor Walker and Lieutenant Governor Mallott, another 17,000 are projected to gain access to health insurance under Medicaid next year. So we appreciate that. And that means more Alaskans can get things like mammograms and physicals. And it means fewer Alaskans will go broke just because they get sick. It will save this State an estimated \$20 million in costs of care for people who can't afford to pay for it. So it's going to make a difference.

We also believe in being good stewards of our land and our planet for the next generation. And that's what I want to spend the rest of my time talking about. One of the reasons I came up here is to really focus on what is probably the biggest challenge our planet faces. If there's one thing that threatens opportunity and prosperity for everybody, wherever we live, it's the threat of a changing climate.

I don't need to tell people here in Alaska what's happening. And over the past few years, I've been trying to make the rest of the country more aware of a changing climate, but you're already living it. You've got longer, more dangerous fire seasons in Alaska, thawing permafrost that threatens homes and infrastructure. Faster glacier melt. Rising seas. Melting sea ice that contributes to some of the fastest coastal erosion in the world.

I met Alaska Natives whose way of life that they've practiced for centuries is in danger of slipping away. On Monday, one Alaska Native woman told me she doesn't want her way of life to go on the endangered species list. And I've talked with folks whose villages are literally in danger of slipping away.

So on my way here, I flew over the island of Kivalina, which is already receding into the ocean. That's what Millie was talking about. Waves sweep across the entire island at times, from one side clear across the other. And for many of those Alaskans, it's no longer a question of if they're going to relocate, but when.

And think about it: If another country threatened to wipe out an American town, we'd do everything in our power to protect it. Well, climate change poses the same threat right now. And that's why I care so deeply about this. If we do nothing, temperatures in Alaska are projected to rise between 6 and 12 degrees by the end of the century. That means more melting, more fires, more erosion, more thawing of the permafrost, more warming after that. And it threatens all of us with hardship, not just people up north.

There aren't many other places in America that have to deal with those questions right now. But there will be. And what's happening here is America's wakeup call. It should be the world's wakeup call. And that's why, over the past 6 years, we've been working to do something about it. We are the number-one producer of oil and gas. But we're transitioning away from energy that creates the carbon that's warming the planet and threatening our health and our environment, and we're going all in on clean, renewable energy sources like wind and solar. And Alaska has the natural resources to be a global leader in this effort.

America right now harnesses three times as much electricity from the wind and 20 times as much from the sun as we did back in 2008. That's how much progress we've already made. And Alaskans now lead the world in the development of hybrid wind energy systems for remote grids, which help, obviously, villages that aren't hooked up to a big power grid. And you're expanding your solar and biomass resources. So Kodiak Island, for example, recently achieved 99.7 percent of its electricity from renewable sources. Its wind power alone displaces more than 2 million gallons of diesel fuel every year. So people are saving money and helping the environment. And today Kodiak Island announced a \$3 million public-private partnership that will make the island the first in the world to adopt new technology that lets it stabilize and store the energy it generates from the wind.

And I know you guys have started putting up solar panels and wind turbines around Kotzebue. And because energy costs are pretty severe up here, for remote Alaskan communities, one of the biggest problems is high energy costs. So we're going to deploy more new clean energy projects on Native lands, and that's going to reduce dependence on fossil fuels, promote new jobs and new growth in your communities.

We've also invested in energy efficiency in every imaginable way: in our buildings, in our cars, our trucks, our homes, our appliances. And all that saves billions of dollars for consumers along the way. So more than 15,000 Alaska homeowners have cut their energy bills by 30 percent on average, and that saves folks here in Alaska more than \$50 million a year.

Anchorage became the first city in the world to replace more than a quarter of its roadway lighting with LED lighting, and that saves the city \$260,000 a year, cuts its energy consumption from lighting by nearly 60 percent. In the town of Tok, the school district replaced its expensive diesel heating and power systems with one fueled by biomass; saved enough money to rehire the counselor, the music teacher, and the boiler operator. That's a good story.

And last month, I announced the first set of nationwide standards to end the limitless carbon emissions from our power plants. And that's the most important step we've ever taken on climate change.

So the good news is, we've made a lot of progress in the last 6 years. But I'm here to tell you we've got to do more. We've got to move faster. We're not moving fast enough. And for the sake of our kids, we've got to keep going. America has to lead the world in transitioning to a clean energy economy.

Now, as we make this transition, we've also got to take more seriously our obligation to help those communities that are already at risk so that they can become more resilient in the face of climate change. Because some of it we're not going to be able to avoid. The planet is already getting warmer. And so communities are already going to be affected, and that's especially pressing here in Alaska.

And that's why today I'm announcing that the Denali Commission will serve as a central coordinator in building what we call climate resilience, helping people adapt. And this is going to cut through bureaucracy and redtape, frees up communities like yours to develop and implement solutions for events like coastal erosion and flooding, and permafrost degradation. And the Denali Commission is also committing \$2 million to support voluntary relocation efforts for vulnerable rural communities. The Department of Housing and Urban Development is going to consult with Arctic coastal tribes, on a nation-to-nation basis, on your unique needs.

And we're also going to help communities build more resilient infrastructure. You shouldn't wait until disaster strikes. We should see if we can invest in communities before the disaster strikes to prevent it.

So today we're announcing more than \$17 million in USDA rural water grants for infrastructure projects in remote Alaskan communities, including one right here in Kotzebue. And we're launching a new competition to support cutting-edge energy efficiency solutions. So the Department of Energy is going to offer technical assistance and advice. If your communities come up with the best strategy for sustainable, efficient energy that's tailored for your community, you're going to get Federal support to make your plans a reality.

And to help Alaskans better plan for sustainable development, the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency and the National Science Foundation are leading a public-private collaboration to create the first-ever publicly available, high-resolution, satellite-based elevation map of Alaska by next year and the entire Arctic by the year after that so that we know exactly what's taking place all across this great State.

So before we came up here, we had a conference down in Anchorage, not just with Americans but from—leaders from around the world. And I told them that when it comes to climate change, there is such a thing as being too late. The effects can be irreversible if we don't act. And that moment is almost here. And you know this better than anybody. I want you to know, as your President, I'm here to make sure that you get the support that you need. But we should be optimistic about what can be accomplished, because there's nothing that we can't do if we work together. America is full of dreamers. We push new frontiers by choice. That's what makes us Americans. Whether we live in the Arctic Circle or on the Hawaiian Islands, whether we're in big cities or small towns, we're one people. And our future is only as good as the efforts that we put into it.

But when people are determined and hopeful and generous, as the people here in Kotzebue are, it makes me optimistic. It tells me that this country's best days are still ahead.

So I want to thank all of you. I especially want to thank the young people for being here today. Thank you, Kotzebue. God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:45 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Millie Hawley, president, Kivalina Tribal Council, who introduced the President.

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