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**For Immediate Release**  
November 5, 2009

## **Remarks by The First Lady at Department of Energy Event**

THE WHITE HOUSE  
Office of the First Lady

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY AT DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY EVENT

U.S. Department of Energy  
Washington, D.C.

2:15 P.M. EST

MRS. OBAMA: Well, hi everybody.

AUDIENCE: Hi!

MRS. OBAMA: You all please sit down. Thank you so much. I am thrilled to be here. It's a pleasure to be here with all of you at the Department of Energy. Now, I have to say -- I told the Secretary this -- the overflow crowd is always a lot more pumped up than the regular crowd. (Laughter.) I think it's because you're in this formal setting and you think you have to behave yourselves. But we can get loud in here. We can be fired up. (Cheers and applause.) There we go!

Let me begin by thanking Secretary Chu for that warm introduction. As you know, Secretary Chu isn't just a brilliant scientist, he's also an inspired leader, and he's bringing new ideas and perspectives to Washington, challenging all of you, all of us, to look at your own work, at our own work, in a whole new way. And we are so incredibly grateful for his leadership. My husband loves his Cabinet. He was extremely excited that he had a real nerd on his team. (Laughter.) He talked about it for weeks on end. So we are delighted to have you on the team, and we're grateful for the work that you do.

I also want to take a moment to thank all of you and to honor all of you. This is one of the reasons why I do these visits. I've had the privilege since coming to Washington to visit many of the agencies. My goal is to get to all of them. As you heard, I was supposed to be here earlier, but this other guy in my life bumped me out of the scene. (Laughter.) It's okay. I try not to take it personally.

But these visits are helpful to me, they're helpful to the administration, because I've said this before: The President and I, we're the new kids on the block here in Washington, D.C. And many of you have been doing this work for longer than I've been alive.

And several of our long-term employees here at the Department of Energy are right in the front row, and I want us to take some time to give them a round of applause for their decades of service. (Applause.)

And I have to say I'm always amazed when I see folks and I hear how long they've been working, because they look too good to be -- have been here -- (laughter) -- some people for 30, 40, 50 years. They must have started when they were 10. (Laughter.)

But we are grateful to you, and you deserve this recognition as well as everyone who's working hard in all of the federal agencies. You don't often get the thanks that you deserve. Sometimes you get a lot of the blame and none of the credit for the progress that has gone on in this country for years, and, you know, this is our small way of making sure that you know that this administration appreciates the work that you do.

But whether it's doing groundbreaking scientific research; or ensuring our nuclear security; making our homes, our offices, our cars, appliances more efficient; or fighting to turn the tide on climate change, what you're doing here couldn't be more urgent. Your work is critical for our economy and our national security and preserving our environment for our kids and our grandkids. That's the work that you do.

And it's not easy. Everyone knows it's not easy. And I know that most of what you're working on right now, as hard as you're working, probably won't even be finished this year, or maybe not even this administration, or even during the course of your careers here at the Department. You may not see the final outcome of the work that you're doing.

So in the coming decades, you all will be passing the torch to the next generation. Truly, you're going to be handing over what you've begun to a lot of young people who are right now just beginning to develop -- those future scientists and public servants. And it truly will be up to that next generation, it's going to be up to them, our children, our grandchildren, the young people that we mentor, it's going to be up to them to carry all of this wonderful work forward.

And it's up to us to ensure that they're prepared to do that. That's our job. We have to get them ready and developed and mature and focused, making sure that they have the knowledge and the skills they need to finish what all of you have started.

We all know that we can't transform our energy future unless we transform our education system -- that, we know -- unless we ensure that every child in America gets a good education, particularly when it comes to math and science. Particularly in the areas of math and science.

That's why we're challenging states to raise their standards, to modernize science labs, to upgrade their curricular -- their curricula, and to recruit and train qualified teachers who will make these subjects more alive, more interesting, more engaging for our students.

That's why we're committed to expanding advanced courses and creating additional opportunities more importantly for underrepresented groups -- and that also means women and girls. We want them to study and succeed in science, math, engineering and technology like never before. We want those numbers up.

So that's why we're so pleased by what folks here at the Department of Energy are doing to get young people excited about science. That's one of the other reasons why I'm here. We've been talking in my staff about this visit for a while because it's unique in what we're doing and what you all are doing. The National Science Bowl you host every year -- and I think there are a lot of people out here who don't know that the Department of Energy has really been supporting this type of initiative for so long -- the National Science Bowl that you host, it draws 20,000 students from 1,800 schools. That is amazing. (Applause.) That's truly amazing.

And the young people who participate in this competition, they put in late nights and long hours, they're pushing themselves and challenging each other to get ready and to get focused on the topic. And they don't just learn biology, chemistry, physics and math in the process. You all know that what they're also learning is discipline and teamwork and problem-solving and communication skills.

The middle school students even design, build and race their own hydrogen-powered cars. It's science at its best, truly. It's hands-on and it's very collaborative in a way that really makes young people excited. I know my kids -- there's nothing like a little competition to get them going. (Laughter.) It fuels kids' imaginations and encourages the innovative thinking that we'll need to meet our nation's challenges in the years to come.

And none of this would be possible without the hard work of folks like all of you who devote so many volunteer hours to making this event happen. All of you all have served as coaches, as timekeepers, as judges, and scorekeepers.

It's my understanding that more than a hundred employees here at the Department of Energy help run the national competition in Washington, and more than 6,000 volunteers contribute their time to run regional competitions across America.

And this includes one individual in particular that I want to just acknowledge who has run the entire operation every year for the past 19 years, and who's waited to retire, I understand -- she put off retiring until she can make it an even 20 years. She's grown this program from just a handful of schools to an institution that's inspired more than 150,000 students since it began in 1991.

So I want us to take a moment to recognize Sue Ellen Walbridge for her terrific work. Sue Ellen. (Applause.) Where is she? There she is, way in the back. (Applause.) See, that's what happens to people who run stuff. They're way in the back. (Laughter.) You can't even seem them. I see her. She's making her way up. All right, she's just waving from the back. (Laughter.) Thanks, Sue Ellen. Today we're going to witness for ourselves -- here she comes. Here comes -- there you -- come on, Sue Ellen. (Applause.) There she is. (Applause.)

Look, I think we all know this is something pretty special -- to start from something so small and grow it into something so big and so meaningful. We are grateful to you for your dedication, for your hard work, for your passion. You are touching the lives of thousands and thousands of young people, and that should give you some level of peace and satisfaction and pride. We are all so very proud of you. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

So today we're going to witness for ourselves the excellent work Sue Ellen and many of you are doing to run this competition. Isn't it exciting? (Laughter.) We're joined today by students from Kenmoor Middle School in Landover, Maryland and Longfellow\* Middle School -- yes, yes! -- (applause) -- and Longfellow\* Middle School in Falls Church, Virginia -- (applause) -- all right, there we go. They're going to give us a little preview of the big day next spring. That's when the competition actually happens, in the spring. So we're the dress rehearsal.

We're going to hold a mini Science Bowl right here. We're all set up. I'm like Alex Trebek -- (laughter) -- and Secretary Chu is like my Vanna White. (Laughter and applause.) Now, this competition won't -- (laughter) -- this competition won't count because it's sort of just like a practice round. But I'll be reporting the results back to the President of the United States, so no pressure, young people. (Laughter.) None at all.

So what are we going to do now? I think Secretary Chu is going to come back up, and then we're going to get this competition started. (Applause)

**U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C.**