

Written Transcript
On The Line Episode 2.9 “Senator Jon Tester”

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Charlie Palmer: Welcome back to On The Line a podcast for today's wildland firefighters. I'm the host Charlie Palmer. Joined once again by Dr. Brent Ruby from the University of Montana's Center for Work Physiology and Exercise Metabolism.

Brent Ruby: Hello. Hi there again,

Charlie Palmer: And this I'm going to tell you as a show of many firsts. This is the first time that we're using the KUFM studios here on the University of Montana campus. This is also the first time that our guest is going to be phoning in for the show, and this is also the first time we've ever had a United States senator on the podcast, Senator Jon Tester from the great state of Montana. Senator Tester welcome to the show.

Sen. Jon Tester: Great to be with you, Charlie, Brent, appreciate the opportunity to visit with your listeners.

Charlie Palmer: Alright, great. So a little bit of backstory. In August of 2017 you helped to procure \$300,000 to help Helena's Eastgate fire department recruit and retain some firefighters. That was through a FEMA grant in August of 2017, over half a million dollars to the Big Sky fire department. \$195,000 for the Red Lodge Fire Department in September of 2017, nearly \$300,000 for Miles City firefighters in October of 2017, \$50,000 for Libby to better equip local volunteer fire departments through the USDA. In 2018 January with the late Senator John McCain from Arizona. You two worked on a fire grants reauthorization act. You also helped find some money for firefighting buckets for the Montana Army National Guard helicopters here in the state of Montana. And then over \$2,000,000 to fire departments in Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response. That's SAFER assistance grant in 2017. So Senator Tester, the first question, why the interest in support of firefighters?

Sen. Jon Tester: Well they are literally first responders, they're there when people get in a bind with fire. They rush into danger every day. They've helped protect lives, protect property, they help manage some of the biggest natural disasters on earth and they need resources to do that. They need training to do that. They need equipment to do that. They need to make sure we have the best kind of folks possible doing that, which takes a special human being to be able to do that to top notch smoke jumpers, making sure the folks that are on the front lines, uh,

understand the dangers, the risks and challenges and know what they're getting into and that, that all takes money. You know, we all hope fire never happens, but every year it does happen. And every year we depend on these folks either from local fire departments or wildland firefighters to protect us.

Sen. Jon Tester: And without those resources, they simply couldn't do their job and bad situations would be even worse. So that's why it's the interest. It's, it's no in, in trying to get a local law enforcement, the cops that are on the beat, the materials and the education and the equipment that they need to be successful protecting human in life. And that's what firefighters do. That's what local law enforcement do. And I will continue to fight, because they provide such incredibly important services and do it , in such an incredibly professional way that, firefighters deserve our support.

Charlie Palmer: In 2006, then incumbent Senator Conrad Burns from Montana criticized some wildland firefighters at the Billings airport. It became, uh, an issue in the campaign when you were running to unseat him. In 2012, your opponent, Denny Rehberg was involved a couple of years previous to that in a suit against the Billings fire department for some monetary damages due to a wildland firefighter that burned part of his property. And so that story kind of entered the picture. So what are your thoughts on how wildland firefighters have kind of entered the narrative when it comes to your lengthy political career?

Sen. Jon Tester: I certainly haven't looked for that, I mean those situations arise during the campaign, but I think in the end, as I look at the firefighters in our state, whether it's the folks that are working out of your local fire department or they're the folks that are fighting wildfires. They got a tough job. They've got a job that is very, very challenging. And if we're able to support them and give them the proper support, they have a much better chance of being successful. And so its impact on my race, I think in both cases was kind of secondary, but what it did point out that it's important that we give these folks the resources they need to fight the fire to do the pre mitigation and recovery when a fire does happen. And that's where it's at. I will tell you that we've got a little fire department in my small town of Big Sandy, uh, they have a little chili feed every year and the community shows up and writes checks of thanks for their supplies and the job that they've done.

Sen. Jon Tester: And I've seen these guys in action. I saw them in action 30, 40 years ago when an elevator caught fire in Big Sandy and burned down. And, and these folks were amazing. I saw them a half a dozen years ago when a big wind came through and blew down a power line. And a farmstead blew up because the farmer had not mowed down the grass. And these guys, in both cases, guys and gals in both cases, put themselves in harm's way and did the best job they could possibly do to protect property and protect lives. And I will tell you that I very much appreciate that. I appreciate that very much because these are the folks that when you call 911, you want somebody at the other end of the line picking up the phone saying you got a problem. We're going to be there as fast as we can get there. And I mean it's, it's just common for me, it's about these folks put

it on the line every day. We need to make sure that we support them in any way possible, whether it's at the local, state or federal level.

Charlie Palmer: The wildfire disaster funding act, which was sponsored by Senator Wyden from Oregon passed Congress earlier this year and that now allows the forest service to use disaster relief funds to fight wildfires instead of borrowing money from other parts of their budget. And what are your thoughts on this change?

Sen. Jon Tester: Well, it's something that I've worked for years and I appreciate Ron Wyden the senator from Oregon for sponsoring this bill and allowing me to get on board with him to make this change. He happens to be chairman of the finance committee and so it shows good leadership on his part, but. But my thoughts are basically this, up until we got this act passed, we had turned the forest service in to a firefighting agency last year, for example, 62 percent of their budget went to fighting fires. So this is money that should have been used for planning, for logging cuts, tree removal for the pathways that people walk on in a forest, trail maintenance, controlled burns, the kind of work that needs to be done to make sure our forests are more resilient. I had forest service people tell me that when the fire season started, they absolutely had to quit their planning work and all that money was used for fighting forest fires.

Sen. Jon Tester: This bill allows Forest Service to reestablish itself as a forest management agency, not a forest fire fighting agency because it sets aside a separate fund of money to take and use for fighting fires and treats forest fires the same way we treat hurricanes or earthquakes or any other natural disaster. So I just think what this does in the end, it gives the forest service the tools it needs to better manage our forests. And I think the upshot of that is it means that there will be more folks working in the woods cleaning out some of the beetle kill. There'll be more folks working on trail and road maintenance. There'll be more folks planning to make the forest more resilient. And one of the challenges that I've had fights with some folks over this is that the forest service will do their work and then they will turn around and get sued in court. I think the way we're funding fires will also make it so that those suits are not as successful and that the forest service view after good planning is done, will result in a healthier forest. And as a result with less smoke in the air, but we needed to get this passed to turn the forest service back into what it truly is. And that's a forest management service when most of their budget was going to fight fires previously,

Charlie Palmer: I think the science is pretty clear that fire seasons are getting longer and because they're longer than they become more expensive. So what are your thoughts then on how we're going to continue to pay for what is an escalating cost even as the forest service is freed up to use some other monies, uh, outside their budget.

Sen. Jon Tester: Think that, you know, it's which comes first, chicken or the egg. And I think that when we set aside this pot of money to fight fires and allows the forest service to do the kind of work they do in the forest. I think long-term this is going to

save us money because our forests are going to become more resilient. And I firmly believe that in the meantime because of climate change it's one of the costs of climate change that we don't think about much. But quite frankly, forest fires and hurricanes are a problem worldwide and we've got to get our arms around it and I think that moving forward we need to work on ways to address climate change in common sense ways that don't shut our economy down because we're literally spending billions of dollars right now through FEMA and other agencies dealing with hurricanes like hit the Carolina's or forest fires this year.

Sen. Jon Tester: We got kind of lucky in Montana, California didn't get so lucky and the year before we weren't so lucky to be able to treat these fires like they are so, treat the fires like a natural disaster. That's what they are. Allow the forest service to do his job as a forest management agency and I think long-term from a fire perspective at least we're going to be able to see some real benefits from the work that the forest service is going to be able to do based on sound science. And I think that's. That's really the direction we need to go.

Brent Ruby: Sen. Tester, this is Brent and I don't get to DC all that often, but when I go, I feel like I have become sort of a Johnny Appleseed sort of researcher advocate for the wildland firefighter because I've been chasing these crews, men and women for 20 years on all kinds of fires, trying to collect as many different types of bio samples as I can get my hands on to understand or help the agency I guess as a whole understand the physiological demands and how that impacts the human. So I really feel like I've become a strong advocate. I've never testified to Congress on such a thing. I'd certainly be happy to do that. We have enough data to warrant a sort of an eye-opening impression of what these teams go through, but what do you think? Every time I go to DC it's, it's this and you probably feel the same way. It's this big paradox between DC and all that has to offer and here back in Montana with the wildland firefighters and what they deal with in the forest. What's happening now in DC that you think might be relevant to today's wildland firefighter?

Sen. Jon Tester: Well look Brent. I'll say first of all, always good to have people who are on the ground come back and advocate for what's really going on, on the ground because I think one of the challenges we have back here, particularly on this issue area, but also in rural areas overall is we need to educate people, we need to continually educate people about the challenges that are out there in rural America in this case with the wildland firefighters and quite frankly the increased occurrence of wildland fires and the pressures it puts on folks that are out there fighting those fires. You know, last year I believe we lost two of the fighters to a beetle kill trees that blew up and it's not. It's not safe work. It's very dangerous work and those firefighters need to be aware of that all the time when they're out there doing their job.

Sen. Jon Tester: But the bottom line is, is that both Democrats and Republicans back here need to understand that these folks don't do this. They don't do the wildland firefighting without good physical training, without good mental training and

having the tools that they need to be able to survive in a very, very harsh environment. So, uh, I don't know if I answered your question or not, but if you've been, if you've been following these teams around for 20 years, what you've seen on the ground is you've seen our fire seasons get longer, you've seen them get more intense, You've seen more pressures put on these crews. You've probably seen health impacts of fighting these fires moving forward. And I think all that information is really, really important as we look for ways to minimize the risk of wildland fires. In the end. You and I both know and anybody that understands this earth that we live on, fires are going to happen. Okay? They are, it's part of a fact of mother nature, but making sure we keep people safe. Making sure that we limit the damage that they do is critically important. And I think the folks in Washington DC need more education on that exact issue.

Brent Ruby: I'm happy to help in any way that I can. I guess our final question is how can we figure out a strategy to continue to work together to support the health and safety of these valuable... I call them national resources. These teams are human natural resources to battle blazes and fires that occur that want to damage our forests, natural resources, so how do we... How do we continue to support these teams?

Sen. Jon Tester: These guys are miracle workers. The guys and gals that are on the line are miracle workers. All you have to do is take a look at a forest fire and understand that mother nature laughs last. See how... See how these guys and gals are able to direct the fire where it needs to go. I am telling you, I am always incredibly amazed when I walk into a fire camp and they show me where the fire is headed. They can tell me what's at risk. They can tell me what they're going to try to do to move the fire into areas that are less populated. It is amazing. What we need to do at the federal levels is understand that, that these folks know their business, they are professionals, and we need to make sure that they have the best and the safest equipment and they get that through at the federal level, at least through these AFG and SAFER grants.

Sen. Jon Tester: Those are critically important. It's why I worked so hard with Senator McCain when he was alive to get those grants reauthorized, because folks in the firefighting business depend on those to move forward and I think if you've got the proper equipment training, the workforce is incredible. I see it every year and that moves forward then. Then I will just tell you this. I think there's some other things we need to do on a long-term basis and national registry linking the risks of firefighting and cancer I think is critically important. Both amongst career and volunteer firefighters. You know these folks sacrifice, they sacrifice a lot. I think we need to know how we can keep them as safe as possible. It's just an area of health coverage. We need to make sure that folks with preexisting conditions can continue to get health coverage because oftentimes since it's a very dangerous occupation, they end up getting a preexisting condition and if they can't get insurance, it's going to dissuade a lot of people from going into this business and like I say, this is something that we need those folks out there in the field because if the fire goes where it wants to go, when it wants to go there, it can cause a lot of damage.

Sen. Jon Tester: And like I said, it will never cease to amaze me that these folks can work with Mother Nature and do their best to direct this fire and keep people out of harm's way. When they do that. They're not always successful, but I will tell you that they are successful the vast majority of the time. Which is amazing to me because I've been in situations where a stubble field has caught on fire and you don't have near the volume of material to burn in a, in a wheat stubble field as you do in a forest. And I'm telling you, when the wind starts blowing, get out of the road, and these guys and gals can figure this out in the woods to make sure that the fire does the least amount of damage and it is truly amazing. So making sure they got the grants, making sure that we're taking care of them from a healthcare standpoint. Both critically important

Charlie Palmer: Senator, a very dynamic time in DC right now. We greatly appreciate you taking the time to visit with us today.

Sen. Jon Tester: Always a pleasure and I want to thank you for the work. Both of you do. Thank you.

Charlie Palmer: You've been listening to On The Line a podcast for today's wildland, firefighter our audio engineer is Mike Matthews, production assistant Joey Moore. And I am your host Charlie Palmer Thanks for listening.

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