Small Repair Shops Say Carmakers Won't Share

By ELIZABETH OLSON

WHEN a longtime customer came in to Bill Cahill's Randolph, Mass., auto repair shop recently to find out why his 2002 Taurus sedan's coolant light was on, Mr. Cahill was stymied.

Plugging in his computerized scanning tool to the car's dashboard, he tried to figure out whether the problem was an electrical short, a computer problem or a faulty switch in the coolant tank.

"Normally, the diagnosis would take about 15 minutes," said Mr. Cahill, who runs his four-person independent shop with his wife, Peggy, outside Boston. But Mr. Cahill didn't have the updated manufacturer's software that was necessary to uncover the problem, so he was forced to send the customer to the local Ford dealership.

A group of mom and pop repair shops across the country is arguing that such scenes are happening too often in the last few years, jeopardizing their bottom line and sometimes even their survival. They contend that auto manufacturers are deliberately withholding information or charging high prices for repair data that used to be readily available at a reasonable cost.

Some stand-alone mechanic shops — which number more than 256,000 nationwide and make an estimated 75 percent of the country's vehicle repairs — are pushing Congress to pass a law, called the Motor Vehicle Owners' Right to Repair Act, to guarantee access to the technical and training data and specialized tools that are required for the shops to make repairs.

Organized by the Coalition for Auto Repair Equality, which represents repair shops and auto parts retailers and franchisees, a group testified at a Congressional hearing last month that manufacturers hold back information that consumers have the right to know about once they have bought a vehicle.

The Alliance of Auto Manufacturers, a trade association of nine car and light-truck manufacturers, including Ford, General Motors and Toyota, denies that it is doing so, and contends that the bill would require relinquishing proprietary information and cut into revenues that are necessary to pay for the more than $20 billion auto manufacturers spend yearly on research and design.

The car companies also say that disclosing such trade secrets could enable modifications of crucial vehicle operating systems, including emissions and safety. This, in turn, could create issues surrounding the validity of a warranty, and perhaps even the performance of such control systems, they maintain.

The manufacturers are worried about unauthorized disclosure of information that smaller companies could use to figure out how to make parts themselves, said Charles Territo, a spokesman for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers.

The manufacturers say a voluntary agreement they entered into two years ago has effectively dealt with the problem. On that point, they have won the backing of one major independent group, the Auto Service
Association, which represents 12,000 independent mechanic businesses nationwide. Bob Redding, its Washington representative, said repair shops had been losing 15 to 20 percent of their business annually until the voluntary agreement was reached.

Federal emissions standards that went into effect in 1996 meant new cars were more sophisticated and required a more advanced level of training and technology to repair, Mr. Redding said. That is the year his group — and its rival, the Coalition for Auto Repair Equality — think that manufacturers began holding back all data about repairs.

Since the agreement, the Auto Service Association has dropped its backing for the Right to Repair Act, which would give the Federal Trade Commission the power to determine what can be withheld as a legitimate trade secret, and would also allow lawsuits against auto firms that violate the law's requirements.

Mr. Redding said such legislation was not needed because the agreement has led to a sharp decline in complaints.

But Sandy Bass-Cors, executive director for the Coalition for Auto Repair Equality, disputes the success rate, citing the coalition's national survey of mechanic shops this summer that found that 59 percent of those questioned had problems getting information, training or tools needed to repair or service cars.

The car industry, Ms. Bass-Cors said, is "trying to monopolize the repair industry."