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Showdown looming over auto repair; Independent shops along with retail service chains fight for access to information, tools and training

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Illustrations: Tony Clement sees need for change.

A major showdown looms this week between automakers, independent repair shops and the federal government over the hot button issue of giving Canadian motorists more choice about where they fix their vehicles.

The "right to repair" issue involves a long-running dispute that now pits industry players and the federal government, who both prefer a voluntary solution, against repair shops and consumers who prefer legislation.

Groups representing thousands of repair shops across the country have complained to Ottawa for years about a lack of access to information, tools and training from manufacturers so they can keep pace with technological advances.

They say that has unfairly kept business at manufacturers' dealerships, to the detriment of independent repair shops ranging from Canadian Tire and Mr. Lube stores and local neighbourhood garages.

There are questions whether the voluntary solution in a recent commitment letter by manufacturers and one group of independent retailers will be adequate and give consumers more choice.

The issue is causing a headache for Industry Minister Tony Clement, who says the feuding parties are making progress in dealing with an unacceptable situation in the marketplace.

Part of the headache is coming from an NDP MP who has introduced a private member's bill addressing the issue that is scheduled for debate in the House of Commons today.

A vote will follow on Wednesday on whether to send the proposed legislation to the federal industry committee for review, or let it die.

The Automotive Industries Association of Canada, which represents about 7,000 parts makers, distributors, wholesalers and repair outlets, is pushing MPs to support the private bill after rejecting an attempt by manufacturers and some retailers to resolve the issue recently through a letter of intent to the government.

"We were not prepared to sign this letter of intent because it didn't address the concerns we had that would assure consumers had a fair option in repairing their cars," said association president Marc

Brazeau.

Domestic and offshore manufacturers and the National Automotive Trades Association, a much smaller group of retailers primarily in B.C. and Ontario, agreed on the letter after Clement urged industry players to address the problem last month by today.

The letter commits the industry to find ways to provide repair shops with information, tools and training that is similar to an agreement in the U.S..

It also says the manufacturers and trade group would complete a voluntary agreement by September this year with implementation by all manufacturers and distributors before May 1, 2010.

But Brazeau and his association said the letter is too little and too late after spending five years pressing the government and manufacturers for action.

The latest letter offers no provisions to bind all industry players to terms of a deal and there is no mechanism for enforcement, he said.

Brazeau also noted that unlike the U.S., Canada has no supporting legislation to make a voluntary industry agreement work.

"It's not close to resolving the problem," said Brazeau.

His comments came after his association refused to join the manufacturers and smaller retailers group in signing the letter of intent two weekends ago.

The government had asked manufacturers for input on the issue last year and Clement expressed concern that a number of them saw no need for action.

In calling for a voluntary agreement last month, Clement said providing conditions necessary for repair shops to compete fairly and provide quality service was a priority.

"Maintaining the status quo is not an option," he wrote in a letter to individual manufacturers.

"The government, however, supports a voluntary solution to this issue - one that is developed by the industry."

Clement could not be reached for comment on the industry's latest response on Friday, but he told the

industry committee recently that the letter represented progress.

His request for a voluntary agreement came two months after MP Brian Masse (NDP-Windsor West) introduced a private member's bill to amend existing legislation that would guarantee access to information, tools and training at fair prices for independent repair shops and retail service chains.

Masse described the industry letter of intent as "useless and not worth the paper it is written on."

He accused Clement of trying to quash critical consumer legislation by desperately trying to gain some industry consensus at the last moment.

Brazeau's industries association has also sent letters to all 308 MPs urging them to support Masse's private members' bill.

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