Transport Topics

EMU: Technicians Try to Break Repair Code

By Eric Miller, Staff Reporter

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Sometimes, it's the seemingly little things that can cause a big problem — something like a tractor headlight going out in the middle of nowhere, USA.

An easy repair?

Not if the truck has a bad sensor and you take it to a repair facility that isn't an authorized manufacturer's dealer, according to Marc Karon, president of Total Truck Parts, a Florida-based seller of parts and services for heavy trucks.

In that case, Karon said it's possible that the repair technician won't be able to access the truck's computer, locate the headlight sensor or reset the computer.

"You don't know where the manufacturers put the sensor for the headlight because they don't give you the wiring diagram," Karon said.

If the technician can't make the repair, the tractor may need to be towed 100 or more miles to an authorized dealer or repair facility, and you may need to pay more to have it fixed after first waiting in line a few days.

Of course, Karon brings an aftermarket viewpoint of a longtime hot-button issue known as "right to repair," a sore spot among truck makers and independent truck repair shops and carriers who want to do their repair work in-house.

He is not alone. The issue has been at the center of the news over the past few months on the heels of passage of the Massachusetts "right to repair" law, signed last month by Gov. DeVal Patrick (D).

Karon is chairman of a group of a dozen heavy-duty truck aftermarket trade associations, the Commercial Vehicle Right to Repair Coalition, a nonprofit that played a role in the campaign for the Massachusetts measure that passed by an 86-14 margin.

The Massachusetts right-to-repair law will prohibit any motor vehicle manufacturer, starting with model year 2013, from selling or leasing, either directly or through a dealer, a new motor vehicle without allowing the owner to have access to the same nonproprietary diagnostic tools and repair information made

available to the manufacturer's dealers and in-state authorized repair facilities. The same information for older heavy-truck models must be made available for purchase.

The law also stipulates that beginning in 2018, manufacturers would have to provide access to the information through a nonproprietary vehicle interface, using a standard applied in federal emissions-control regulations. Custom-spec'd heavy vehicles are exempt.

With commercial vehicles becoming more complex every day, "right to repair" remains such a thorny issue that it will be an educational session topic during the annual meeting of American Trucking Associations' Technology & Maintenance Council in Nashville, Tenn., in March.

In their promotional literature, TMC officials said that fleets and independent service providers have "reportedly been experiencing significant difficulties obtaining information needed to make vehicle repairs.

"So much so that various groups have been calling for legislation at the federal and state level to ensure independent service providers and equipment owners have access to any information necessary to service or repair vehicles without the need to return to the original equipment manufacturer service network," it said.

In a 2010 TMC fleet survey, nearly 80% of the respondents ranked access to repair problems as "very important or moderately important."

Half said they had experienced difficulty in obtaining information needed for repairs, and of those, 86% said the cost of those repairs was higher as a result.

The three repair areas that have created the greatest code access problems were electrical, emissions control and power plant, according to the survey.

Frustration levels haven't subsided since the 2010 survey, said Lew Flowers, owner of Flowers Fleet Services in Oklahoma City and chairman of TMC's access to repair task force.

"Trucks will have a light come on, and you've got to do something with it," Flowers said. "If you don't have the right test equipment, you have to take it back to the dealer. When you take it back to the dealer, you're in line with everybody else."

Truckers often attribute the lack of a widespread sharing of computer codes and diagnostic tools to too many trucks chasing too few authorized repair dealers and affiliated independent repair shops.

"I know that we pretty consistently have a backlog of work and that there are across the country long wait times to get service," said one dealership executive who asked to remain anonymous. "So if I'm a fleet operator, and I have an asset that is taken out of service because nobody's available to work on it, then obviously I want more people to have that capability."

"What I know is happening is that the OEMs are wanting that equipment back in their shop for warranty purposes and everything else" said Lee Long, director of fleet services for South Carolina-based Southeastern Freight Lines and a former TMC chairman. "That's where the whole battle line is drawn, so to speak.

"If you look at the history over the last few years, the wait time to get a truck in and repaired and back out the door has increased enormously. It has more than doubled in recent years when we take a truck to a dealership."

Long said Southeastern has 81 locations and 26 shop locations. It does 82% of its maintenance and repair in-house.

It's the other 18% that he has to outsource that can get to him.

"One of the problems we run into comes when we have equipment that is out of our shop operating range," Long said.

"When we cannot access that information in a timely fashion, we have to take it to the OEM dealer to have it repaired," he added. "When that happens, we have to take out a piece of equipment that we could be producing revenue with."

Right-to-repair bills have been introduced in New Hampshire, Maine, New Jersey and New York, said Joseph Suchecki, vice president of public affairs for the Truck & Engine Manufacturers Association.

One partial solution is offered by the independent truck repair chain WheelTime, which last year signed an agreement with Spanish firm Cojali USA to provide training and advanced diagnostics and software tools for all truck makers.

Cojali USA developed a customized multibrand tool that integrates all major systems and manufacturers — engine, transmission, brake systems, cabin system, suspension and more — into one software bundle.

"We looked at over 3,000 inspections and realized that there was a huge amount of volume of repairs coming through our shops that we could be performing if the customers wanted us to," WheelTime President Mike Delaney said.

To capture that unrealized business, WheelTime needed to expand its access to parts, train its mechanics and acquire the ability to do the diagnostics, Delaney said.

But when it came to diagnostics, there really were no existing options, according to Delaney.

"When you have to go to every single component manufacturer, every truck maker, every coach maker, every engine maker, every transmission maker, and everybody is selling an individual package of its own, it's sort of staggering," he said.

So was the cost to put myriad tools into the hands of WheelTime's 3,500 technicians at 200 locations throughout the United States, Canada, and Australia.

The answer: a single diagnostics tool that could be used for all makes and models.

The tool developed for WheelTime was customized for the North American market as a follow-up to one developed in Europe, where truck makers are by law required to assist independent garages in fixing their vehicles by making their tools, codes and software available at a competitive price.

Cojali's customized diagnostic tool also embedded in its Jaltest software a complete system technical database, including schematics and wiring diagrams.

"A tool like this has never existed in North America before," Delaney said. "It will revolutionize the ability for independent shops to perform high-quality repairs on a broad range of equipment with confidence. In addition, shops will be able to buy the software, and continuous upgrades, for a fraction of the investment they would have to make buying all of the modules individually from OEMs — if they could get them at all."

Despite the success in Massachusetts, so far, state and federal legislative efforts for a right-to-repair law generally have fallen flat.

That's one of the reasons TMC and Karon's coalition have indicated they are pursuing a softer solution.

After the success in Massachusetts, the hope is to bring vehicle manufacturers, component manufacturers, independent service providers, truck owners and distributors together to negotiate an agreement that will make technical and product information available in a fair manner.

"We're not trying to ram this down anybody's throat," Karon said.

"There is activity heating up, and we're not expecting this to go away anytime soon," Suchecki said. "We will get into some discussions with the commercial right-to-repair folks on this in the future and see if there is some middle ground — what they're really interested in — and what we can work together on. Obviously, it's a big issue."

The Automotive Aftermarket Industry Association already is sitting at the table with automakers seeking a negotiated agreement, said Aaron Lowe, AAIA's vice president of government affairs.

Lowe called the Massachusetts right-to-repair legislative and referendum measures, "a hard-fought effort by our industry."

Heavy-truck manufacturers say they want to maintain goodwill with their product users and are willing to help out in ways that don't allow trade secrets to be passed on to their competitors.

The Massachusetts law opponents stated in campaign literature that the measure would negatively alter how repair information is provided and effectively mandate the redesign of all cars, trucks, 18-wheelers, public transit, school buses, fire engines, ambulances, motorcycles and RVs.

They said it would require the use of 15-year-old, outdated technology, and that such a redesign would add to sticker price.

They also noted that there was the issue of protection for fleets that don't want customer-specific parameters such as speed limiters and progressive shift points, getting into the hands of their competitors.

EMA's Suchecki said that manufacturers have opposed wholesale right-to-repair legislative measures that don't put controls on who gets what information and what they can do with it.

"Anybody can't just go in and change things like the safety settings or emissions settings," Suchecki said. "We require all our dealers and authorized repair facilities to go through training so that they know what they're doing."

"Manufacturers have to be able to somehow protect their trade secrets and proprietary information that are key to some of their marketing and some of the advantages they've built into their vehicles," he added.

Suchecki said that because the U.S. heavy-truck manufacturing industry is not vertically integrated, truck manufacturers may not actually possess some of the information for various components.

Despite talk of finding a solution, Southeastern's Long said the aftermarket treatment of his trucks remains the company's biggest maintenance headache.

“When we sign on the dotted line to buy a truck, we feel that we ought to be able to maintain that truck,” Long said. “We need to control our own destiny. When we have to keep taking it back to the dealership, that’s where it really starts hurting us.”