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Claiming a Right to Fix Your Own Stuff



Cell phone being repaired.

By [Richard Dahl](#) on August 01, 2019 6:00 AM

If you buy something, it's yours to fix, right?

Wrong, say many manufacturers. Over the last decade or two, manufacturers in several industries — consumer electronics, automobiles, and farm implements, in particular — have been making it difficult for people to fix their own stuff.

They require that repairs be done by the manufacturer or an authorized provider. They refuse to provide replacement parts. Or the proper tools. Or repair manuals.

And from phones to tractors, [instances of consumer frustration](#) abound:

- In 2016, thousands of iPhone 6 users were left with inoperative handsets after Apple's operating system shut them down after detecting that repairs had been done by a non-Apple technician.
- Many farmers have turned to "tractor hacking" – including use of pirated Ukrainian firmware – in response to John Deere's requirement that purchasers of their implements have repairs done only by company technicians.
- Nikon no longer sells replacement parts to independent repair shops, giving it a monopoly over product repair.

‘Right to Repair’

While manufacturers contend that allowing people to fix increasingly complex products creates security vulnerabilities, American consumers are becoming fed up. The result is a movement called "Right to Repair," and it appears to be gaining momentum.

[Some 20 states are contemplating Right to Repair laws, and the Federal Trade Commission](#) recently signaled its own interest in the subject with a workshop that examined, among other things, whether the repair restrictions violate federal consumer-protection laws.

The six-year-old nonprofit [Repair Association](#), a trade association representing independent repair workers, has pushed a state-by-state legislative agenda calling for changes that would benefit the repair industry and DIYers alike. Specifically, the state bills would require equipment manufacturers to provide consumers and independent repair businesses the same access to tools, service parts, repair documentation, diagnostics, and firmware as the manufacturers' direct or authorized repair providers.

The [U.S. Public Interest Research Group](#) has also joined the effort, focusing its support on the environmental impact of restrictive repair requirements. "It means more cost to consumers, and also means more waste," U.S. PIRG says. "Americans throw out 416,000 cell phones per day, and only 15 to 20 percent of electronic waste is recycled. ... We imagine a different kind of system, where instead of throwing things out, we reuse, salvage and rebuild."

Massachusetts and Elizabeth Warren Step Up

Despite the growing momentum behind Right to Repair, however, the only state that has passed a consumer protection law in this area is Massachusetts, which in 2013 enacted a Motor Vehicle Right to Repair Law, which provided residents the right to repair their cars wherever they wanted.

Meanwhile, Sen. Elizabeth Warren from that state has responded to the John Deere repair restrictions by proposing a [farmer's right-to-repair law](#).

Consumer Options for Now

If you're looking to fix your own electronic device, a company called iFixit might be of help. iFixit is dedicated to helping consumers get around restrictive repair requirements by offering parts and [free repair guides](#).

If you're interested in learning more about the effort to give consumers greater freedom in trying to fix the stuff they have purchased, the [Repair Association](#) is a good place to start.