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10 SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

11 COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO

13 **THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF**  
14 **CALIFORNIA,**

15 Plaintiff,

16 v.

17 **VITOL INC.; SK ENERGY AMERICAS,**  
18 **INC.; SK TRADING INTERNATIONAL**  
19 **CO. LTD.; AND DOES 1- 30, INCLUSIVE,**

20 Defendants.

CASE NO.

**CC-20-584456**

**COMPLAINT FOR VIOLATIONS OF  
THE CARTWRIGHT ACT AND UNFAIR  
COMPETITION LAW FOR DAMAGES,  
INJUNCTIVE RELIEF, CIVIL  
PENALTIES, AND OTHER EQUITABLE  
RELIEF**

**PUBLIC—REDACTS MATERIALS  
FROM CONDITIONALLY SEALED  
RECORDS**

## INTRODUCTION

1. In February 2015, an explosion rocked a large gasoline refinery complex located in Torrance, California. A key part of the refinery complex was badly damaged and needed extensive repairs. This accident caused an unexpected undersupply of refined gasoline in California, because the refinery supplied about ten percent of all the gasoline in the state.

2. Prices for gasoline contracts went up almost immediately on the California spot markets. Soon thereafter, prices at the pump soared as well. Despite rapidly rising prices, California's motorists still needed gasoline. Starting in February 2015, California consumers saw increases in gasoline prices that were unprecedented.

3. California's supply disruption created an opportunity for gasoline trading firms with a global reach, such as Defendants Vitol Inc. ("Vitol"), SK Energy Americas, Inc. ("SKEA"), and SK Trading International Co., Ltd. ("SKTI") (collectively, "SK").

4. Defendants Vitol and SK acted quickly, negotiating large contracts to supply much-needed gasoline and gasoline blending components for delivery in California. The largest of these contracts exceeded more than ten million gallons.

5. Unfortunately for California consumers, Defendants Vitol and SK participated in a scheme to drive up and manipulate the spot market price for gasoline so that they could realize windfall profits on these large contracts to deliver gasoline and gasoline blending components.

6. Defendants Vitol and SK had already started working together covertly prior to the explosion. In the aftermath of the explosion, the lead traders for both Vitol and SK, who were friends and former colleagues, reached agreements with each other and with third parties as part of a scheme to manipulate, raise, fix, and tamper with the spot market price of gasoline in California using various tactics. They also entered into agreements with each other to share the profits and disguise or hide the nature of the scheme.

7. During the relevant period (beginning at least as early as February 2015 and continuing into late 2016), Vitol and SK reached agreements with each other and with third parties in violation of California's Cartwright Act, California Business and Professions Code section 16720 et seq., and engaged in unlawful, unfair, or fraudulent practices in violation of



1 California's Unfair Competition Law, California Business and Professions Code section 17200 et  
2 seq.

3 8. Defendants Vitol and SK may not have created the supply disruption that impacted  
4 California starting in February 2015, but they exacerbated the effects of that disruption to illegally  
5 enrich themselves at great cost to California consumers.

### 6 JURISDICTION AND VENUE

7 9. This Court has subject matter jurisdiction over all causes of action alleged in this  
8 Complaint pursuant to the California Constitution, article VI, section 10, and is a Court of  
9 competent jurisdiction to grant the relief requested. The People's claims for violation of Business  
10 and Professions Code sections 16720 et seq. and 17200 et seq., arise under the laws of the State of  
11 California, are not preempted by federal law, do not challenge conduct within any federal  
12 agency's exclusive domain, and are not statutorily assigned to any other trial court.

13 10. At all relevant times alleged in this Complaint, Defendants did or continue to do  
14 substantial business in or affecting the State of California, rendering this Court's exercise of  
15 jurisdiction over them proper. Defendants are registered with the California Secretary of State to  
16 conduct business in California.

17 11. Venue is proper in this Court pursuant to California Code of Civil Procedure  
18 sections 395 and 395.5, and California Business and Professions Code sections 16750 and 16754.

19 12. Enforcement actions initiated by the Attorney General for violations of the  
20 Cartwright Act may be brought in the superior court in and for any county where the offense or  
21 any part thereof is committed or where any of the offenders reside or where any corporate  
22 defendant does business. (Bus. & Prof. Code, § 16754.) Defendants are registered with the  
23 California Secretary of State to conduct business in the State of California. The injuries that have  
24 been sustained as a result of Defendants' illegal conduct occurred in part in the City and County  
25 of San Francisco.

## PARTIES

### I. PLAINTIFF

13. Attorney General Xavier Becerra is the chief law enforcement officer of the State of California. (Cal. Const., art. V, § 13). He brings this action on behalf of the People of the State of California.

14. The Attorney General is charged with enforcing California's antitrust laws, including the Cartwright Act. (Bus. & Prof. Code, §§ 16700-16770.) He is authorized to "bring a civil action in the name of the people of the State of California, as *parens patriae* on behalf of natural persons residing in the state . . . to secure monetary relief as provided in this section for injury sustained by those natural persons to their property by reason of any violation of this chapter." (Bus. & Prof. Code, § 16760.)

15. The Attorney General is also authorized under the Unfair Competition Law to prosecute any unlawful, unfair, or fraudulent business act or practice. (Bus. & Prof. Code, §§ 17200, 17204.) For any such violation, he is also authorized to seek injunctive relief, civil penalties, and any orders or judgments, including the appointment of receivers, as may be necessary to prevent the use or employment by any person of any unlawful, unfair, or fraudulent business act or practice. (Bus. & Prof. Code, §§ 17203, 17204, 17206.)

### II. DEFENDANTS

#### A. Vitol

16. Defendant Vitol Inc., ("Vitol") a Delaware corporation, is a multi-billion dollar privately-held energy company with its principal place of business in Houston, Texas. Vitol Holdings B.V., founded in the Netherlands, is the world's largest independent oil trading house and is the ultimate parent entity of Vitol. Vitol is registered with the California Secretary of State to conduct business in California.

#### B. The SK Defendants

17. Defendant SK Energy Americas, Inc., ("SKEA") is a California corporation with its head office at 11700 Katy Freeway, Suite 900, Houston, Texas. SKEA is a wholly-owned subsidiary of SK Energy International ("SKEI"). SKEI is a Singaporean corporation with its head



1 office at 9 Straits View, #12-07/12 Marina One West Tower, Singapore. SKEI is the parent entity  
2 of Defendant SKEA and is itself a wholly-owned subsidiary of Defendant SK Trading  
3 International Co., Ltd.

4 18. Defendant SK Trading International Co., Ltd. ("SKTI") is a South Korean  
5 corporation with its head office at 26 Jongno, Jongno-gu, Seoul, South Korea. Defendant SKTI is  
6 the grandparent entity of Defendant SKEA and the parent entity of SKEI. Defendant SKTI is a  
7 sister entity to SK Energy, also located in South Korea, which operates one of the largest oil  
8 refineries in the world.

9 19. The ultimate parent entity for the SK Defendants, and for SK Energy, is SK  
10 Innovation Co., Ltd., a publicly-traded South Korean company.

11 20. At all times relevant to this Complaint, Defendant SKEA was an agent and alter  
12 ego of Defendant SKTI, due to the nature and extent of control that SKTI exercised over SKEA.

13 21. At all times relevant to this Complaint, there existed a unity of interest and  
14 ownership between SK Defendants such that any separateness between them had ceased to exist  
15 and SKTI controlled, dominated, managed, and operated SKEA to suit its convenience.  
16 Specifically, SKTI controlled the business and affairs of SKEA such that the distinction between  
17 the companies were mere technicalities.

18 22. Additionally, at all times relevant to the Complaint, SKEA was acting within the  
19 course and scope of its agency with the knowledge, consent, permission, authorization, and  
20 ratification, either express or implied, of SKTI in performing the acts alleged in this Complaint.

21 **C. The Doe Defendants**

22 23. The Attorney General is not aware of the true names and capacities of defendants,  
23 whether individual, corporate, affiliate, or otherwise, sued herein under the fictitious names  
24 DOES 1 through 30, inclusive, and therefore sues those defendants by fictitious names. Each  
25 fictitiously named defendant is responsible in some manner for the violations of law alleged. The  
26 Attorney General will amend this Complaint to add the true names of the fictitiously named  
27 defendants once they are discovered, as well as the manner in which each fictitious defendant is  
28 responsible for the violations of law herein alleged, when these facts are ascertained.

## BACKGROUND

### I. CALIFORNIA'S FINISHED GASOLINE MARKET

24. The California finished gasoline market is like an island. California and the U.S. West Coast are geographically isolated from refining hubs in the rest of the United States. There are no pipelines that ship finished gasoline products into California. While there are pipelines that connect California and other adjacent states, these pipelines only ship gasoline products out of California. Therefore, when local supplies are insufficient to meet demand in California, additional finished gasoline and gasoline blending components are typically brought into the state on marine vessels.

25. California has vehicle emissions standards that are more stringent than the rest of the country. Gasoline produced pursuant to these standards is called California Reformulated Gasoline Blendstock for Oxygenate Blending ("CARBOB"). The CARBOB specifications are unique to California; therefore, gasoline used in neighboring states generally does not meet CARBOB specification and cannot be used as a substitute source of supply. Non-CARBOB gasoline such as Reformulated Gasoline Blendstock for Oxygenate Blending ("RBOB") is generally less expensive to produce than CARBOB.

26. Most of the CARBOB consumed in California is produced locally by refineries located in clusters near metropolitan centers in Northern California and Southern California. Absent supply disruptions, California refineries have production capacities that meet or exceed statewide demand.

27. One of the largest refineries in Southern California is located in Torrance, California (the "Torrance Refinery"). The Torrance Refinery produces approximately twenty percent of all of the gasoline sold in Southern California (and ten percent of the statewide supply). The Torrance Refinery also has the capacity to produce significant quantities of alkylate, a high-quality gasoline blending component. In 2015, the Torrance Refinery was owned by ExxonMobil Corp. ("ExxonMobil").

28. Gasoline refineries are complex operations that require extensive maintenance on pre-planned or scheduled time intervals to assure operating reliability and meet operating permit



1 requirements. For scheduled maintenance, a gasoline refinery or parts of the refinery are shut  
2 down for what are referred to as “planned turnarounds.” Planned turnarounds usually have little  
3 impact on the price of gasoline, as refineries build up inventories or arrange for alternate supply  
4 in advance of a planned turnaround to offset the reduced production during the shutdown period.

5 29. “Unplanned outages,” conversely, are when unexpected problems occur during  
6 refinery operations. During an unplanned outage, a gasoline refinery or parts of the refinery are  
7 shut down with little or no advance notice. As a result, during an unplanned outage, there is an  
8 unanticipated reduction in the production of that refinery without an offsetting buildup of supply.  
9 Consequently, an unplanned outage can lead to an unexpected supply shortage and a resulting  
10 increase in the price of gasoline.

11 30. When unexpected supply disruptions occur, it can be difficult to find immediate  
12 alternative sources of supply due to California’s stringent CARBOB specifications and relative  
13 geographic isolation. Market participants frequently turn to imports brought in by ship to make  
14 up for shortfalls that occur during a supply disruption, but there can be a significant time lag due  
15 to transit time. For example, ships carrying CARBOB or other blendstocks from refineries in  
16 Asia can take several weeks or more to arrive in California.

## 17 **II. GASOLINE SPOT MARKET TRADING IN CALIFORNIA**

18 31. Market participants buy and sell gasoline for physical delivery within a short time  
19 frame on “spot markets.” There are various spot markets in the United States where gasoline and  
20 other fuels are traded. Two of the spot markets are in California: one is in San Francisco for  
21 delivery in Northern California; the other is in Los Angeles for delivery in Southern California.

22 32. Spot markets are referred to as “physical” markets because market participants use  
23 them to obtain supplies of actual product. As a result, physical markets are located at or near  
24 refinery hubs and the trades consummated on the spot market designate a delivery location and  
25 delivery timeframe. Spot market transactions that provide for nearly immediate delivery after the  
26 execution of the trade are called “prompt” trades.

27 33. The prices on the two California spot markets are greatly influenced by the prices  
28 on the New York Mercantile Exchange (“NYMEX”). The NYMEX is a futures market for

1 delivery of gasoline to New York Harbor. It is sometimes called a “paper market” rather than a  
2 physical market, because market participants close most futures transactions before making or  
3 taking physical delivery. Prices on the NYMEX are determined in a centralized market: there are  
4 typically thousands of gasoline trades on the NYMEX amounting to billions of gallons on every  
5 trading day. Further, all transactions on the NYMEX are publicly reported, so pricing is  
6 transparent to market participants.

7 34. NYMEX prices are for RBOB, not CARBOB, so the California spot market price  
8 is usually, but not always, higher than the NYMEX. That difference in prices between CARBOB  
9 and RBOB, whether positive or negative, is expressed in cents per gallon. This difference is  
10 referred to as a “spread,” the “basis,” or the “differential.” The NYMEX prices generally reflect  
11 large-scale national and international factors, while the California spot markets react to the  
12 NYMEX price as well as regional and local supply and demand conditions. In many California  
13 spot market transactions, the buyer and the seller negotiate only the basis, and the final price is  
14 determined by adding the basis to the NYMEX price.

15 35. Spot market deals in California generally range between 420,000 gallons (10,000  
16 barrels) to 2.1 million gallons (50,000 barrels). The spot market price is the largest component of  
17 the price on the wholesale “rack market,” which is typically sold in gasoline truck volumes of  
18 about 8,000 gallons (approximately 190 barrels). The price at the rack market is typically  
19 reflected in the retail price within a couple of days.

20 36. There are two common grades of CARBOB that are consumed in California and  
21 traded on the spot market. Regular CARBOB (“Regular”) is the most commonly traded grade of  
22 gasoline. Premium CARBOB (“Premium”) is traded with far less frequency than Regular.  
23 Premium trades at a higher price than Regular. Alkylate is a high-quality gasoline blending  
24 component that can be combined with other blendstocks to create Regular and, more often,  
25 Premium.

### 26 **III. SPOT MARKET PRICE REPORTING IN CALIFORNIA**

27 37. Unlike the NYMEX, spot market trades in California for both Regular and  
28 Premium are traded through non-public transactions, sometimes called over-the-counter (“OTC”)



1 trades. These OTC transactions do not occur on a centralized open exchange like the NYMEX,  
2 so prices on the California spot markets are not immediately public. Instead, market participants  
3 rely on price-reporting services that report spot market prices from sources that participate in the  
4 market, such as traders, refiners, and brokers.

5 38. The Oil Price Information Service, LLC ("OPIS") is the most widely used  
6 reporting service in California. OPIS is a subscription service that publishes a daily OPIS West  
7 Coast Spot Market Report (the "Spot Market Report"), which is the industry pricing benchmark  
8 used by both buyers and sellers in California. Subscribers to OPIS get the Spot Market Report  
9 and can also receive market updates from OPIS throughout the day that include reported deals  
10 and other industry news.

11 39. Price reporting by OPIS plays a crucial role in certain types of gasoline contracts  
12 which use a "floating price" that is determined at a future date as indicated in the contract. The  
13 parties agree on a differential above or below the spot price or prices published by OPIS. These  
14 floating price contracts can be tied to the future price of Regular or Premium as reported by OPIS  
15 in the Spot Market Report.

16 40. The future dates on which the floating price in the contract is set are often referred  
17 to as "pricing windows." The pricing window can be an agreed-upon date or a date range.  
18 Pricing windows can also be tied to the dates of delivery or other conditions as indicated in the  
19 contract.

20 41. Market participants voluntarily submit information on their trades to OPIS. OPIS  
21 calculates a daily spot price by, among other things, aggregating the trades that are reported to  
22 OPIS by market participants on a voluntary basis. Therefore, the reporting of trades is a critical  
23 component of how OPIS calculates the daily spot prices.

24 42. The Spot Market Report includes, among other gasoline products, the prices for  
25 Regular and Premium gasoline contracts for prompt (i.e., near term) delivery in Southern  
26 California and in Northern California. The Spot Market Report also contains forward prices for  
27 Regular and Premium delivery in upcoming future months.

43. On a daily basis, there are usually many more Regular trades than Premium trades listed in the Spot Market Report. For example, there could be five, ten, fifteen, or more Regular trades reported on one day compared to one or no Premium trades. Because trading in Premium is less common than Regular, a single Premium trade that is reported to OPIS tends to have a bigger impact on the spot market price than a single trade of Regular.

#### **IV. RULES GOVERNING SPOT MARKET TRADING IN CALIFORNIA**

44. In California, fraudulent gasoline spot market trading is covered by California's commodities fraud statute. (Corp. Code, § 29504 (defining "commodities")). Under the commodities fraud statute, when buying or selling commodity contracts, it is unlawful to engage in certain fraudulent acts. (See Corp. Code, § 29536, subds. (a), (b), (c), (d).

45. Specifically, under section 29536(c), it is unlawful to "[t]o willfully engage in any transaction, act, practice, or course of business which operates or would operate as a fraud or deceit upon any persons." (Corp. Code § 29536, subd. (c).)

46. In addition to the California commodities fraud statute, the federal Commodity Exchange Act makes unlawful certain types of "[p]rohibited transactions." (7 U.S.C. § 6c.) More specifically, the Commodity Exchange Act prohibits a transaction that "is, of the character of, or commonly known to the trade as, a 'wash sale' or 'accommodation trade.'" (7 U.S.C. § 6c(a)(2)(A)(i).)

47. The Commodity Exchange Act also prohibits a transaction that "is used to cause any price to be reported, registered, or recorded that is not a true and bona fide price." (7 U.S.C. § 6c(a)(2)(B).)

#### **V. THE DEFENDANTS' PARTICIPATION IN THE CALIFORNIA SPOT MARKET**

##### **A. Vitol's U.S. West Coast Trading Operation**

48. During the relevant period, Vitol was an active participant in trading gasoline in California. Vitol bought and sold spot market contracts for various types of fuel products, including Regular and Premium.



1           49.     Vitol imported gasoline and gasoline blending components (such as alkylate) into  
2 California. [REDACTED]

3 [REDACTED]  
4           50.     Vitol employee Brad Lucas ("Lucas") held the title "USWC Trader." Lucas was  
5 the primary trader at Vitol with responsibility for trading gasoline and gasoline blending  
6 components that were delivered via pipeline within California.

7           51.     Lucas reported to John Addison ("Addison"), a Vitol executive who in turn  
8 reported to the President of Vitol Americas. In addition to supervising Lucas, Addison also had  
9 trading responsibility that included trading gasoline and gasoline blending components that were  
10 primarily delivered via marine vessels to locations in the U.S. West Coast, including California.

11 [REDACTED]  
12 [REDACTED]  
13 [REDACTED]  
14 [REDACTED]  
15 [REDACTED]  
16 [REDACTED]  
17 [REDACTED]  
18 [REDACTED]  
19 [REDACTED]  
20 [REDACTED]  
21 [REDACTED]  
22 [REDACTED]  
23 [REDACTED]  
24 [REDACTED]  
25 [REDACTED]  
26 [REDACTED]

1           **B. SK's U.S. West Coast Trading Operation**

2           55. During the relevant period, SK was an active participant in trading gasoline in  
3 California. SK bought and sold spot market contracts for various types of fuel products,  
4 including Regular and Premium.

5           56. SK imported gasoline and gasoline blending components (such as alkylate) into  
6 California. [REDACTED]

7 [REDACTED]  
8           57. SKEA employee David Niemann ("Niemann") was the senior trader responsible  
9 for executing trades on the U.S. West Coast, including California. Another SKEA employee,  
10 Shelly Mohammed ("Mohammed"), held the role of gasoline scheduler and was Niemann's  
11 subordinate.

12           58. SKEA functioned as the California trading arm of SKTI. While Niemann and  
13 Mohammed were nominally employees of Defendant SKEA, SK's U.S. West Coast Trading  
14 Operation was conducted within the continuous and pervasive control and supervision of SKTI,  
15 acting for itself and through its wholly-owned subsidiary, SKEI.

16 [REDACTED]  
17 [REDACTED]  
18 [REDACTED]  
19 [REDACTED]  
20 [REDACTED]  
21 [REDACTED]  
22 [REDACTED]  
23 [REDACTED]  
24 [REDACTED]  
25 [REDACTED]  
26 [REDACTED]  
27 [REDACTED]  
28 [REDACTED]



1 [REDACTED]  
2 [REDACTED]  
3 62. As discussed in more detail below, SKTI also specifically reviewed and approved  
4 key decisions to coordinate certain trading activities with Vitol.

5 **FACTUAL ALLEGATIONS**

6 **I. VITOL AND SK BEGIN COORDINATING**

7 63. SK hired Niemann in August 2014 and Niemann immediately began trading  
8 gasoline contracts on the California spot market. Before being hired by SK, Niemann held a  
9 similar role at Vitol for approximately ten years. Niemann and Lucas overlapped at Vitol, and  
10 even after leaving Vitol, Niemann maintained connections with Lucas and others at Vitol.

11 64. Starting in or around late October 2014 or early November 2014, Vitol and SK  
12 reached an agreement to coordinate or cooperate in regards to certain trading activities in the  
13 United States West Coast, including California.

14 [REDACTED]  
15 [REDACTED]  
16 [REDACTED]  
17 [REDACTED]  
18 [REDACTED]  
19 [REDACTED]  
20 [REDACTED]  
21 [REDACTED]

22 67.

23 [REDACTED]  
24 [REDACTED]  
25 [REDACTED] In

26 fact, Vitol and SK took steps not to reveal the nature of these agreements to other market  
27 participants.  
28

1           68.     When Vitol and SK started cooperating in late 2014, there was ample supply in the  
2 California market and spot market prices for Regular were at or below the NYMEX price for  
3 RBOB for much of November and December 2014.

4           69.     In December 2014, however, there were indications that a significant unplanned  
5 refinery outage might occur. [REDACTED]

6 [REDACTED] The hydrocracker is a part of a  
7 refinery that plays an important role in refining heavier oils into fuels.  
8 [REDACTED]  
9 [REDACTED]  
10 [REDACTED]

11           72.     “FCC” is shorthand for a “fluid catalytic cracking,” which is a key part of a  
12 refinery complex that produces gasoline and related high-value products like alkylate. The  
13 Torrance Refinery’s FCC unit was particularly important because it produced a significant  
14 portion of all the high-octane alkylate produced in California. The alkylate produced at the  
15 Torrance Refinery was a key gasoline blending component for Premium produced in California.  
16 [REDACTED]  
17 [REDACTED]

18           74.     At some point in February 2015, Lucas and Niemann expanded the coordination to  
19 include Premium. [REDACTED]  
20 [REDACTED]

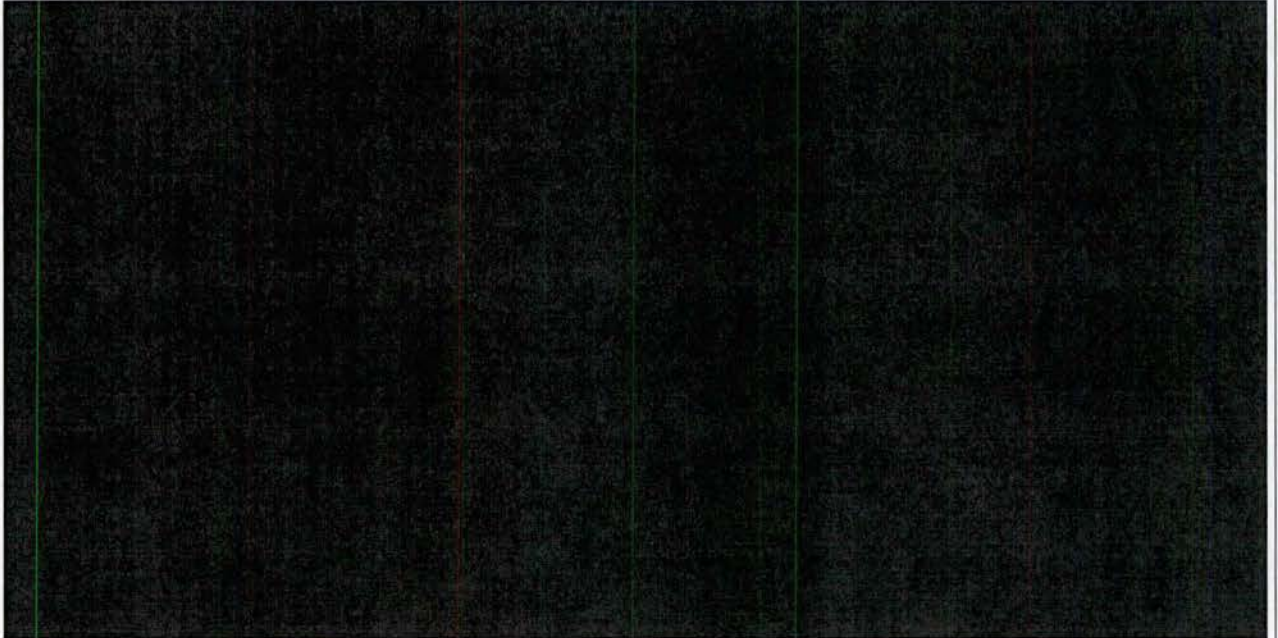
21           75.     By February 2015, Niemann was the senior trader for SK with responsibility for  
22 California trading, Lucas had the same role with Vitol, and their respective firms were  
23 competitors in the California gasoline market.

## 24     **II.     THE EXPLOSION AT THE TORRANCE REFINERY IN FEBRUARY 2015**

25           76.     During the morning hours of February 18, 2015, there was a large explosion at the  
26 Torrance Refinery. The blast occurred in a part of the FCC unit. It caused significant damage to  
27 the refinery and was felt in the surrounding community.  
28



1           77.     The Torrance Refinery immediately shut down the FCC and reduced production of  
2 gasoline products, including alkylate, as repair efforts and a federal investigation into the  
3 explosion commenced. As a result of this unplanned outage at the Torrance Refinery,  
4 ExxonMobil needed to replace a significant amount of lost gasoline and alkylate production in  
5 Southern California to fulfill ExxonMobil's supply needs.



16     **III.     THE SCHEME TO FIX AND MANIPULATE THE CALIFORNIA SPOT MARKET PRICE**

17           80.     Beginning at least as early as late February 2015, Vitol and SK reached  
18 agreements with each other and with third parties as part of a scheme to raise, fix, and tamper  
19 with the price of finished gasoline in California by using various tactics. A core element of the  
20 scheme was manipulating the OPIS-reported price during pricing windows for large contracts.  
21 The goal of the scheme was simple: to drive up or stabilize the OPIS-reported price during  
22 pricing windows and to realize supra-competitive profits while limiting bona fide market risk.

23           81.     While tactics employed by Vitol and SK during the scheme varied and were often  
24 complex, there were two primary components: (1) engage in trades that were reported to OPIS for  
25 the purpose of inflating the OPIS-published price in the Spot Market Report, and (2) execute  
26 facilitating trades to hide or disguise the nature of the scheme, to limit or eliminate bona fide  
27 market risk on the reported trades, and to share profits with each other. As part of the scheme,  
28

1 Vitol and SK engaged in the following conduct as part of transactions between themselves, as  
2 well as transactions involving a third party or third parties.

3 **A. OPIS-reported trades**

4 82. As a core component in the scheme, Vitol and SK engaged in trades to move up or  
5 inflate the OPIS-reported price during the pricing windows for large contracts. During these key  
6 date ranges, Vitol and SK engaged in selectively reported transactions and loss-leader  
7 transactions that were reported to OPIS to drive up, stabilize, or arrest the decline of the OPIS-  
8 reported price. Sometimes they used the services of an intermediary broker, and sometimes they  
9 transacted directly. Vitol and SK also, at times, made strategic bids to buy and offers to sell at  
10 prices calculated to impact the OPIS price assessment.

11 83. Many of the loss-leader transactions were “leveraged” because they involved  
12 taking losses on the purchase of smaller quantities of gasoline to increase the profits on the sale of  
13 larger quantities of gasoline or alkylate by artificially increasing the OPIS-reported price. While  
14 the individual market-moving transactions were often uneconomic, Vitol and/or SK realized a  
15 price increase on the larger floating price contracts (the leveraged side) that more than made up  
16 for any losses on the smaller loss-leader transactions. These leveraged/loss-leader transactions  
17 could take different forms.

18 84. One tactic used by Vitol and SK when trading Regular was to transact the high  
19 deal of the day when the deal was reported to OPIS. This tactic had the effect of bidding up the  
20 OPIS-reported price, as OPIS reported purchases at increasingly higher prices. Sometimes, this  
21 deal was the absolute highest deal of the day; other times, subsequent deals pushed the price even  
22 higher.

23 85. By transacting the high deals, SK and Vitol moved up the average of the OPIS  
24 Spot Market Report and created the impression to other market participants that there was strong  
25 demand, including demand at higher than prevailing market prices.

26 86. A similar tactic when trading Regular was to transact the first deal of the day at an  
27 inflated price during key pricing windows. This involved completing an initial transaction during  
28 the early trading hours so that OPIS would report an inflated purchase price to other market



1 participants. An early purchase at an inflated price would signal artificially high demand, thereby  
2 discouraging would-be sellers from submitting offers to sell below that price.

3 87. Another tactic was to execute a market-spiking trade for Premium that was  
4 reported to OPIS. Compared to Regular, there is far less trading of Premium. On a single day  
5 there could be several OPIS-reported transactions for Regular, but there were many days when  
6 OPIS reported no Premium deals at all. Therefore, individual Premium trades reported to OPIS  
7 could have a significant impact on the spot market price.

8 88. [REDACTED]  
9 [REDACTED]

10 [REDACTED] As part of the scheme, however, Vitol and SK engaged in unusual  
11 market-spiking trades for Premium with each other and with third parties. These individual  
12 trades, while generally uneconomic, could spike the market price of Premium by ten cents or  
13 more on a single day.

14 89. Vitol and SK engaged in market-spiking trades for Premium to increase the OPIS-  
15 reported price for Premium during the pricing windows for large sales of alkylate. While alkylate  
16 is a key blending component for Premium, alkylate is not a separately reported commodity on  
17 California's spot markets.

18 90. Consequently, large floating price contracts for alkylate were most commonly tied,  
19 with a small differential, to the OPIS-reported price for Premium during the associated pricing  
20 window. Therefore, to realize supra-competitive profits on alkylate contracts, Vitol and SK  
21 worked together to inflate the price of Premium during key pricing periods. There were also  
22 scenarios, however, where Vitol and SK worked to inflate the price of Regular to advantage  
23 floating-price contracts for alkylate because those contracts were directly tied to the price of  
24 Regular or as part of a strategy to increase prices of both Regular and Premium, which often rise  
25 in tandem.

#### 26 **B. Facilitating Trades**

27 91. As another component of the scheme, Vitol and SK executed facilitating trades  
28 that were related to the OPIS-reported transactions referenced above. These facilitating trades

1 were executed for various purposes, including to hide or disguise the nature of the scheme, to  
2 limit or eliminate bona fide market risk on the reported trades, and to share profits with each  
3 other. Facilitating trades could be executed at the same time, before, or after the OPIS-reported  
4 trades. Vitol and SK executed these facilitating trades with each other and with third parties.

5 92. For example, Vitol and SK conducted a second trade that was in the opposite  
6 direction of the OPIS-reported trade. This type of round-trip or round-turn facilitating trade,  
7 sometimes called a “wash” trade, effectively negated the volume of gasoline purportedly  
8 exchanged in the OPIS-reported trade.

9 93. The facilitating trade was often not reported to OPIS as a means of hiding the  
10 manipulative nature of the reported trade from OPIS and the wider market. The second trade  
11 ensured that no gasoline would actually change hands as a result of the OPIS-reported trade that  
12 inflated the price reported in the Spot Market Report.

13 94. By moving in the opposite direction of the reported trade, the facilitating  
14 transaction ensured that there was little or no market risk associated with the reported transaction.  
15 Many of the facilitating trades – sometimes called “accommodation” or “prearranged” trades –  
16 appear to have been preplanned. The facilitating trade often had the effect of locking in a loss but  
17 also limiting the total exposure that Vitol or SK faced as result of the reported transactions.

18 95. The facilitating trades could occur before or after the reported trade. For example,  
19 prior to a pricing window, Vitol and/or SK took preplanned “short” positions, ensuring that they  
20 would need to buy during the pricing window. Therefore, when Vitol and SK went on buying  
21 sprees that pushed up the OPIS-reported prices during the pricing windows, it would appear to  
22 other participants that there was an increase in demand, but in fact the demand was preplanned  
23 and artificial.

24 96. Another facilitating tactic was to engage in unreported trades as a means of sharing  
25 profits from the scheme. In this way, Vitol and SK entered into prearranged buy and sell  
26 contracts with each other as a means of transferring money rather than actual gasoline. These  
27 contracts often deviated from the prevailing market price and, therefore, were uneconomic.  
28



1           97. As a means of sharing profits and aligning incentives to artificially increase the  
2 market price, Vitol and SK also entered into contracts with each other designed to share in the  
3 supra-competitive profits earned from manipulating the floating price contracts. [REDACTED]  
4 [REDACTED]  
5 [REDACTED]

6           **C. The Vitol and SK Agreements**

7           98. As alleged earlier, while engaging in this scheme, Vitol and SK also entered into  
8 covert agreements to share profits. [REDACTED]  
9 [REDACTED]

10           Vitol and SK took steps not to reveal the nature of these  
11 agreements to other market participants.

12           99. The coordination between Vitol and SK began with Regular in late 2014 and then  
13 expanded to include Premium in February 2015. [REDACTED]  
14 [REDACTED]

15           100. At some point in mid- to late-2015, Vitol and SK expanded their so-called "JVs"  
16 to include alkylate cargoes. Under this arrangement, Vitol or SK would import a cargo, but Vitol  
17 and SK would work together to boost the profits from selling the alkylate while seeking to  
18 conceal the cooperation. The agreement was apparently at the outset a verbal agreement only. [REDACTED]  
19 [REDACTED]  
20 [REDACTED]

21           101. The agreement to share the profits of the alkylate cargoes was a crucial component  
22 of the scheme. As discussed above, Vitol and SK engaged in market-spiking trades during the  
23 pricing windows for large sales of alkylate. Therefore, when Vitol and SK shared the profits  
24 from the alkylate cargoes, it aligned their incentives to inflate the OPIS-reported prices during the  
25 pricing window for that alkylate.

26           102. In June 2016, this coordination was ongoing, as were the efforts to keep it covert.  
27 [REDACTED]  
28 [REDACTED]

1 [REDACTED]  
2 [REDACTED]  
3 103. While the so-called "joint venture" agreements were being reached, SK and Vitol  
4 engaged in the trading manipulation described above to benefit their common interest. Therefore,  
5 while it may have appeared to market participants that Vitol and SK were competitors, in fact the  
6 two companies were working together. Despite the terminology used, the "joint ventures" were  
7 effectively a sham or pretext for cooperation and were a method of engaging in prearranged  
8 transactions and avoiding competition.

9 104. Furthermore, the agreements to coordinate Regular and Premium trading and to  
10 share the profits of alkylate cargoes also reduced and eliminated competition between Vitol and  
11 SK for those products. As part of the coordination, Vitol and SK entered into a large number of  
12 preplanned trades that diverged from prevailing market prices.

13 105. For the duration of the scheme, Lucas of Vitol and Niemann of SK had the  
14 opportunity to coordinate with each other and reach agreements through multiple means of  
15 communications, including instant messaging, emails, and telephone calls, as well as in-person  
16 meetings, dinners, and drinks.

17 **V. The Illicit Scheme Harmed California Consumers**

18 106. By objective measures, Vitol and SK were effective in carrying out the scheme.  
19 During key pricing windows, Vitol and SK were able to artificially move and inflate the price of  
20 Regular and Premium.

21 107. In the most egregious examples, Vitol and SK were able to manipulate Regular  
22 and Premium prices so effectively that those prices moved higher or stayed higher to a degree that  
23 is nearly inexplicable when compared to the supply and demand fundamentals prevailing at the  
24 time of the pricing windows.

25 108. Furthermore, Vitol and SK both reaped extraordinary and supra-competitive  
26 profits, as California trading generated millions of dollars of profits per month.

27 109. Lucas of Vitol and Niemann of SK personally shared in this windfall [REDACTED]  
28 [REDACTED]



1 110. Vitol and SK's gains came at the expense of consumers across California. To  
2 effectuate the scheme, Vitol and SK were manipulating the spot market prices for all of  
3 California. The impact of inflated spot market prices was not limited to floating price contracts.

4 111. The spot market price translates to the "rack" market prices, which are the  
5 wholesale prices that are paid when a gasoline tanker truck is filled up. Inflated rack market  
6 prices then directly translate into inflated prices in the retail market and ultimately what is paid at  
7 the pump.

8 112. While Vitol and SK engaged in the scheme to target certain contracts, the impact  
9 of the scheme on the wider gasoline market was foreseeable to Vitol and SK.

10 113. Furthermore, the harm to consumers was not limited to the pricing windows. The  
11 repeated exercise of inflating the spot market price over time had residual impacts on the spot  
12 market prices even outside of the pricing windows specified in the contracts.

13 114. In this case, the illicit agreements and spot market manipulation rippled throughout  
14 the California gasoline market such that consumers paid more than they should have at retail gas  
15 stations.

16 115. While the precise end date of the scheme is not yet known, the illicit conduct  
17 continued into 2016. The scheme likely terminated at or around the time that Niemann left SK in  
18 late 2016.

#### 19 **TOLLING OF THE STATUTES OF LIMITATIONS**

20 116. The statute of limitations applicable to the People's Cartwright Act claim is four  
21 years. The statute of limitations applicable to the People's Unfair Competition Law claim is also  
22 four years.

23 117. The People, by and through Attorney General Xavier Becerra, entered into  
24 agreements with SK and Vitol tolling the statutes of limitations applicable to the People's claims.  
25 These tolling agreements have effective dates of August 3, 2018, and March 8, 2019,  
26 respectively. The parties subsequently executed additional tolling agreements to extend the  
27 termination dates of the tolling periods specified in the original agreements. These termination  
28 dates have not passed prior to the filing of this Complaint.

1           118. To the extent any of the People's causes of action would have accrued before the  
2 effective dates of these tolling agreements, the People invoke the doctrine of fraudulent  
3 concealment.

#### 4                                   **FRAUDULENT CONCEALMENT**

5           119. Throughout the relevant period, Defendants affirmatively and fraudulently  
6 concealed their unlawful conduct.

7           120. The People had neither actual nor constructive knowledge of the facts supporting  
8 claims for relief despite diligence in trying to discover the pertinent facts. The People did not  
9 discover, and could not have discovered through the exercise of reasonable diligence, the  
10 existence of the scheme alleged herein, or any facts that might have led to the discovery of the  
11 scheme, any earlier than June 7, 2018.

12           121. The People could not have discovered these violations earlier in time because  
13 Defendants conducted their scheme in secret, concealed the nature of their unlawful conduct and  
14 acts in furtherance thereof, and fraudulently concealed their activities through various other  
15 means and methods designed to avoid detection.

16           122. Defendants engaged in a coordinated and unlawful market manipulation scheme,  
17 which they affirmatively concealed by, among other things, engaging in trades that were reported  
18 to OPIS to artificially inflate the OPIS-reported benchmark price (published in OPIS's Spot  
19 Market Report) without revealing that the Defendants were parties to the trade, and then  
20 executing related trades that were not reported to OPIS to disguise the nature of their scheme, to  
21 limit potential losses on reported trades, and to share profits with one another. This scheme was,  
22 by its very nature, self-concealing. As a result of the fraudulent concealment of the scheme, the  
23 People assert the tolling of the statute of limitations otherwise applicable to the People's claims.



1 **FIRST CAUSE OF ACTION**

2 **Violation of the Cartwright Act**

3 **(California Business and Professions Code section 16720 et seq.)**

4 123. The People incorporate by reference and reallege the preceding allegations in  
5 paragraphs 1 – 122 as though fully set forth herein. The People bring this claim against all  
6 Defendants, including both named and Doe Defendants.

7 124. Beginning at a time presently unknown to the People, but at least in or around  
8 February 2015 and continuing at least through late 2016, Defendants entered into and engaged in  
9 an unlawful trust in restraint of trade and commerce, as described above, in violation of California  
10 Business and Professions Code section 16720 et seq. (hereafter “Section 16720”).

11 125. This scheme consisted, without limitation, of a continuing agreement,  
12 understanding, or concert of action among Defendants, the substantial terms of which were to fix,  
13 maintain, control, increase, inflate, tamper with, or otherwise manipulate and make artificial the  
14 benchmark prices of Regular and Premium that OPIS published in its Spot Market Report to  
15 market participants. At all relevant times, Defendants were competitors in this market.

16 126. For the purpose of forming and effectuating the unlawful trust, Defendants:

- 17 • Engaged in trades with each other and with third parties that were reported to  
18 OPIS for the purpose of fixing, maintaining, controlling, increasing, inflating,  
19 tampering with, or otherwise manipulating and making artificial, the  
20 benchmark prices of Regular and Premium published in OPIS’s Spot Market  
21 Report in order to profit on other OPIS-based positions Defendants  
22 maintained;
- 23 • Executed facilitating trades to hide or disguise the nature of their market  
24 manipulation scheme, to limit or eliminate bona fide market risk on the  
25 reported trades, and to share ill-gotten profits amongst themselves; and
- 26 • Entered into anticompetitive agreements with each other.
- 27
- 28

1 127. The scheme has had, among other things, the following effects:

- 2 • Affected the value of contracts for Regular, Premium, and alkylate that were
- 3 based on artificially inflated benchmark prices;
- 4 • Suppressed competition among the Defendants for the purchase and sale of
- 5 Regular, Premium, and alkylate; and
- 6 • Affected the wholesale and retail market prices for Regular and Premium in
- 7 California, which are based on and affected by California spot market prices

8 128. Defendants' scheme constitutes a per se violation of Section 16720.

9 129. Defendants' scheme was carried out and effectuated within the State of California,  
10 and the resulting impact on California's spot, wholesale, and retail markets for finished gasoline,  
11 caused by Defendants' unlawful conduct, injured natural persons in this state.

12 130. As a result of Defendants' violations of Section 16720, natural persons residing in  
13 the State of California were injured in their business and property in that they paid more for  
14 finished gasoline in California than they would have in the absence of Defendants' unlawful  
15 conduct.

16 131. Accordingly, the Attorney General brings this action pursuant to California  
17 Business and Professions Code section 16760 and seeks, on behalf of the People, treble damages  
18 and the costs of suit, including reasonable attorneys' fees. The Attorney General also seeks  
19 injunctive relief pursuant to California Business and Professions Code section 16754.5.

## 20 **SECOND CAUSE OF ACTION**

### 21 **Violation of the Unfair Competition Law**

#### 22 **(California Business and Professions Code section 17200 et seq.)**

23 132. The People incorporate by reference and reallege the preceding allegations in  
24 paragraphs 1 – 131 as though fully set forth herein. The People bring this claim against all  
25 Defendants, including both named and Doe Defendants.

26 133. Beginning at a time presently unknown to the People, but at least in or around  
27 February 2015 and continuing through 2016, Defendants committed acts of unfair competition, as  
28



1 described above, in violation of California Business and Professions Code section 17200  
2 (hereafter "Section 17200").

3 134. Defendants' unlawful, unfair, or fraudulent business acts or practices, as described  
4 above, constitute unfair competition within the meaning of Section 17200, and include, without  
5 limitation, the following:

- 6 • Violating Section 16720, as set forth above;
- 7 • Engaging in, whether in concert or not, wash sales, accommodation trades,  
8 prearranged trades, and transactions made for the purpose of manipulating the  
9 benchmark prices reported on the California gasoline spot market, all in violation of  
10 California's commodities fraud statute (Corp. Code, §§ 29535, 29536, 29537, 29538);
- 11 • Engaging in, whether in concert or not, wash sales, accommodation trades,  
12 prearranged trades, and transactions made for the purpose of manipulating the  
13 benchmark prices reported on the California gasoline spot market, all in violation of  
14 the Commodity Exchange Act (7 U.S.C. § 1 et seq.).

15 135. As a result of Defendants' violations of Section 17200, California consumers were  
16 injured in their business and property in that they paid more for finished gasoline in California  
17 than they would have in the absence of Defendants' unlawful, unfair, or fraudulent conduct.

18 136. Accordingly, the Attorney General brings this action pursuant to California  
19 Business and Professions Code section 17200 and seeks injunctive relief, restitution, and civil  
20 penalties pursuant to California Business and Professions Code sections 17203 and 17206.

#### 21 **PRAYER FOR RELIEF**

22 WHEREFORE, Plaintiff, the People of the State of California, pray for relief as follows:

23 137. That judgment be entered in favor of the People and against Defendants;

24 138. That the Court adjudge and decree that Defendants' contracts, agreements, or  
25 combination constitutes an illegal restraint of trade in violation of the Cartwright Act, section  
26 16720 et seq. of the Business and Professions Code;

27 139. That the Court adjudge and decree that Defendants' acts violate the Unfair  
28 Competition Law, section 17200 et seq. of the Business and Professions Code;

1           140. That the People be awarded their damages, trebled, in an amount according to  
2 proof;

3           141. That the People be awarded restitution for their loss as a result of Defendants' acts  
4 in violation of state antitrust or consumer protection statutes and laws, including section 17200 of  
5 the Business and Professions Code;

6           142. That the People and natural persons be awarded pre- and post-judgment interest,  
7 and that the interest be awarded at the highest legal rate from and after the date of service of the  
8 initial complaint in this action;

9           143. Pursuant to Business and Professions Code section 16754.5, that the Court enter  
10 all orders necessary to prevent Defendants, as well as Defendants' successors, agents,  
11 representatives, employees, and all persons who act in concert with Defendants from engaging in  
12 any act or practice that constitutes a violation of the Cartwright Act, section 16720 et seq. of the  
13 Business and Professions Code, including such mandatory injunctions as may be reasonably  
14 necessary to restore and preserve fair competition;

15           144. Pursuant to Business and Professions Code section 17203, that the Court enter all  
16 orders necessary to prevent Defendants, as well as Defendants' successors, agents,  
17 representatives, employees, and all persons who act in concert with Defendants from engaging in  
18 any act or practice that constitutes unfair competition in violation of Business and Professions  
19 Code section 17200;

20           145. Pursuant to Business and Professions Code section 17203, that the Court enter all  
21 orders or judgments as may be necessary to restore to any person in interest any money or other  
22 property that Defendants may have acquired by violations of Business and Professions Code  
23 section 17200, as proved at trial;

24           146. Pursuant to Business and Professions Code section 17206, that the Court assess a  
25 civil penalty of two thousand five hundred dollars (\$2,500) against Defendants for each violation  
26 of Business and Professions Code section 17200, as proved at trial;

27           147. That the People recover their costs and reasonable attorneys' fees; and  
28



148. That the Court grant other legal and equitable relief as it may deem just and proper, including such other relief as the Court may deem proper to redress, and prevent recurrence of, the alleged violation in order to dissipate the anticompetitive effects of Defendants' violations, and to restore competition.

## JURY TRIAL DEMAND

The People hereby demand a trial by jury for all causes of action, claims, or issues in this action that are so triable.

Dated: May 4, 2020

Respectfully Submitted,

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