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9	Cargornia		
10	SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA		
11	COUNTY OF ALAMEDA		
12	PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF		
13	CALIFORNIA, Case No.		
14	Plaintiff, COMPLAINT FOR INJUNCTIVE RELIEF AND CIVIL PENALTIES		
15	v.		
16	AMAZON.COM, Inc., a Washington		
17	corporation,		
18	Defendant.		
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20	Plaintiff People of the State of California, by and through Rob Bonta, Attorney General of		
21	the State of California (the "People"), hereby allege as follows:		
22	INTRODUCTION		
23	1. This complaint seeks to remedy Defendant Amazon.com, Inc.'s ("Amazon")		
24	violations of the Unfair Competition Law (Bus. & Prof. Code, § 17200 et seq.) and the Safe		
25	Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act of 1986 (Health & Saf. Code, § 25249.5 et seq.)		
26	("Proposition 65"), arising from its sale to consumers in California of skin-lightening face creams		
27	on Amazon.com containing high levels of mercury. These products include but are not limited to:		
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Chandni Skin Whitening Cream, Espinicida Voam, Dr. Japan Skin Lightening Complex, Kanza Beauty Cream, Dr. Yanhee Whitening Cream (purple cream), Nano Extra White, 4K Plus Night Cream and La Milagrosa Facial Cream (collectively, "Products").

- 2. Mercury is a powerful neurotoxin that impairs the nervous system, and prenatal exposure can impede normal development in fetuses and young children. Exposure to mercury can lead to irritability, muscle incoordination, memory loss, brain damage, and even death. Mercury is capable of being absorbed through skin, and the transfer of mercury from a consumer's hand to a common surface area can also create an exposure source for children and other household members.
- 3. The Products contained levels of mercury that resulted in exposures above the amounts specified by the United States Food & Drug Administration ("FDA"): 1 part per million ("ppm") in face creams that are not eye creams, and 65 ppm in eye creams, but only when the mercury is used as a preservative when no other ingredient is available.
- 4. Each of the Products is adulterated within the meaning of the California Sherman Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Law ("Sherman Law") because, due to high mercury levels, each "bears or contains any poisonous or deleterious substance that may render it injurious to users under the conditions of use prescribed in the labeling or advertisement of the cosmetic, or under conditions of use as are customary or usual." (Health & Saf. Code, § 111670; see 21 U.S.C. § 361(a).) "It is unlawful for any person to receive in commerce any cosmetic that is adulterated or deliver or proffer for delivery any such cosmetic." (Health & Saf. Code, § 111700.) Thus, the Products may not be manufactured, delivered, held, or offered for sale in California. (*Ibid.*) Further, their sale in California constitutes an unlawful business practice in violation of Business and Professions Code section 17200.
- 5. While Amazon did not manufacture any of the Products, at all times relevant to this lawsuit Amazon sold and/or delivered the Products and other similar face creams with excessive mercury levels to California consumers.

- 6. Under Proposition 65, businesses must provide a "clear and reasonable warning" before exposing individuals to chemicals identified as known to the State of California to cause cancer or reproductive harm.
  - 7. Mercury is known to the State of California to cause reproductive harm.
  - 8. People who used the Products were exposed to mercury.
- 9. At all times relevant to this lawsuit, Amazon did not provide a clear and reasonable warning regarding exposure to mercury from the Products available for sale on its website, as required by Proposition 65, except in the case of one of the two sales Amazon made to the People of the La Milagrosa Facial Cream Product. This failure to provide warnings constitutes a violation of Health and Safety Code section 25249.6, and it also constitutes an unlawful business practice in violation of Business and Professions Code section 17200.
- 10. Mercury is used as an intended ingredient in certain skin-lightening products, as it interferes with the body's production of melanin, which is responsible for tanning of the skin. Skin-lightening products often are used by individuals with darker skin, and most cosmetics and skin products in the beauty sector are marketed toward women. Thus, the inclusion of this dangerous metal in skin-lightening products disproportionately harms women and people of color.

### **PARTIES**

- 11. Plaintiff People of the State of California brings this action by and through Rob Bonta, the Attorney General of California ("Attorney General").
- 12. The Attorney General is the chief law officer of the State and has the authority to file civil actions in order to protect public rights and interests. (Cal. Cont., art. V, § 13; Bus. & Prof. Code, § 321.) The Attorney General may bring actions in the name of the People of the State of California to prohibit unfair and unlawful business practices (Bus. & Prof. Code, § 17204) and to enforce Proposition 65 (Health & Saf. Code, § 25249.7, subd. (c)).
- 13. The State of California has an interest in promoting the health of its residents, including and especially women, children, and persons of color. To that end, California seeks to

eliminate the sale of dangerous skin-lightening products containing unlawful amounts of mercury to consumers in California.

14. Defendant Amazon.com, Inc. is a corporation organized and existing under the laws of the State of Washington. Amazon.com, Inc. employs more than 10 employees, and is a person within the meaning of the Sherman Law (Health & Saf. Code, § 111825), the Unfair Competition Law (Bus. & Prof. Code, § 17201), and Proposition 65 (Health & Saf. Code, § 25249.11). The People are informed and believe, and thereon alleges, that Amazon operates physical business locations, including software development and fulfillment centers, in the State of California. At all times relevant to this lawsuit, Amazon offered for sale, sells, sold, holds, delivered, and delivers the Products into California.

#### **JURISDICTION**

- 15. This Court has jurisdiction pursuant to California Constitution Article VI, section 10, because this case is a cause not given by statute to other trial courts.
- 16. This Court has jurisdiction over Amazon because Amazon does sufficient business in California, or otherwise has sufficient minimum contacts in California, to render the exercise of jurisdiction over it by the California courts consistent with traditional notions of fair play and substantial justice.
- 17. Venue is proper in this Court because this cause arises in the County of Alameda, because at all times relevant to this complaint, Amazon.com, Inc. had four physical locations and the Products were available for purchase via internet sales.

#### STATUTORY BACKGROUND

#### A. The Sherman Law—Adulterated Cosmetics

18. Under the Sherman Law, "[i]t is unlawful for any person to manufacture, sell, deliver, hold or offer for sale any cosmetic that is adulterated." (Health & Saf. Code, § 111700.) Further, "[i]t is unlawful for any person to receive in commerce any cosmetic that is adulterated or deliver or proffer for delivery any such cosmetic." (*Id.*, § 111710.) "A cosmetic is adulterated if it bears or contains any poisonous or deleterious substance that may render it injurious to users under the

conditions of use prescribed in the labeling or advertisement of the cosmetic, or under conditions of use as are customary or usual." (*Id.*, § 111670; see 21 U.S.C. § 361(a).)

- 19. Under Federal law, the introduction or delivery for introduction into interstate commerce of any cosmetic that is adulterated is prohibited. (21 U.S.C. § 331.)
- 20. The term "cosmetic" is defined as "any article, or its components, intended to be rubbed, poured, sprinkled, or sprayed on, introduced into, or otherwise applied to, the human body, or any part of the human body, for cleansing, beautifying, promoting attractiveness, or altering the appearance." (Health & Saf. Code, § 109900; see 21 U.S.C. § 321(i).)

## B. The Sherman Law—Misbranded Cosmetics

- 21. Under the Sherman Law, it is unlawful to sell, receive in commerce, deliver, or proffer for delivery any cosmetic that is misbranded. (Health & Saf. Code, §§ 111765 and 111775.) A cosmetic is misbranded if it fails to list manufacturer, distributor, or packer information, as well as "an accurate statement of the contents in terms of weight, measure or numerical count." (*Id.*, § 111740.). A cosmetic can also be deemed misbranded if any other required "word, statement or other information" is not "prominently placed upon the label or labelling with conspicuousness . . . ." (*Id.*, § 111745.)
- 22. A cosmetic is misbranded if its labeling is misleading. (Health & Saf. Code, § 111730,) In determining whether the labeling is misleading, the extent to which the labeling does not reveal facts or consequences of customary use of the cosmetic should be considered. (*Id.*, § 110290.)
- 23. Under Federal law, the introduction or delivery for introduction into interstate commerce of any cosmetic that is misbranded is prohibited. (21 U.S.C. § 331.) A cosmetic is misbranded under Federal law if its labeling is false or misleading; if the packaging fails to bear manufacturer, packer, or distributor information; if the label fails to bear an accurate statement of the quantity of contents; or if any word, statement, or other required information "is not prominently placed [on the label] with such conspicuousness [...] and in such terms as to render it likely to be read and understood by the ordinary individual under customary conditions of purchase and use." (21 U.S.C. § 362.)

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24. Business and Professions Code section 17200 provides that "unfair competition shall mean and include unlawful, unfair or fraudulent business practice ...." Business and Professions Code section 17203 provides that "[a]ny person who engages, has engaged or proposes to engage in unfair competition may be enjoined in any court of competent jurisdiction." Actions for relief under the Unfair Competition Law "shall be prosecuted exclusively in a court of competent jurisdiction by the Attorney General or a district attorney . . . . " (Bus. and Prof. Code, § 17204.)

25. Business and Professions Code section 17206, subdivision (a) provides that "[a]ny person who engages, has engaged, or proposes to engage in unfair competition shall be liable for a civil penalty not to exceed two thousand five hundred dollars (\$2,500) for each violation, which shall be assessed and recovered in a civil action brought in the name of the people of the State of California by the Attorney General, [or] by any district attorney..." These penalties are "cumulative to each other and to the remedies or penalties available under all other laws of this state." (Bus. & Prof. Code, § 17205.)

# D. Proposition 65

- 26. The Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act of 1986 is an initiative statute passed as Proposition 65 by a vote of the People in November of 1986.
- 27. The warning requirement of Proposition 65 is contained in Health and Safety Code section 25249.6, which provides:

No person in the course of doing business shall knowingly and intentionally expose any individual to a chemical known to the state to cause cancer or reproductive toxicity without first giving clear and reasonable warning to such individual, except as provided in Section 25249.10.

28. Proposition 65 establishes a procedure by which California, through its Governor, develops and maintains a list of chemicals "known to the State to cause cancer or reproductive toxicity." (Health & Saf. Code, § 25249.8.) Pursuant to this process, mercury and mercury compounds were listed in [1990] as chemicals known to the State to cause reproductive toxicity. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 27, § 27001, subd. (c).) Warnings required for exposures to a listed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> See https://oehha.ca.gov/media/downloads/proposition-65//p65chemicalslist.pdf.

chemical must be given beginning one year after the chemical first appears on the list. (*Id.*, § 25249.10., subd. (b).)

- 29. Proposition 65 regulations provide that a warning is "clear and reasonable" if the name of the chemical is included in the warning, and the warning is "prominently displayed on a label, labeling, or sign [. . .] with such conspicuousness as compared with other words, statements, designs or devices on the label, labeling or sign, as to render the warning likely to be seen, read, and understood by an ordinary individual under customary conditions of purchase or use." (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 27, § 25601.)
- 30. For internet purchases, Proposition 65 regulations specify that "a warning is not prominently displayed if the purchaser must search for it in the general content of the website." (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 27, § 25602.)
- 31. Actions to enforce Proposition 65 may be brought in the name of the People of the State of California by the Attorney General or by certain other public prosecutors, including district attorneys. (Health & Saf. Code, § 25249.7, subd. (c).) Proposition 65 provides that any person "violating or threatening to violate" the statute may be enjoined in any court of competent jurisdiction. (*Id.*, § 25249.7, subd. (a).) Violators are liable for civil penalties of up to \$2,500 per day for each violation. (*Id.*, § 25249.7, subd. (b).)

#### **FACTS**

- 32. Mercury and mercury compounds were listed under Proposition 65 as chemical knowns to cause reproductive toxicity on July 1, 1990. (Cal. Code Regs., tit. 27, § 27001, subd. (c).)
- 33. Mercury can enter the body through inhalation of vapors, ingestion of contaminated food or water, or dermal contact. The nervous system is very sensitive to mercury, and permanent brain damage can occur as a result of exposure. The adverse effects of mercury, which can vary depending on the form or compound involved, include irritability, nervousness, changes in vision, loss of hearing, muscle incoordination, and memory loss. Other effects of mercury exposure include nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, increased blood pressure or heart rate, and skin rashes.

Mercury exposure in pregnancy can cause birth defects and developmental delay in children. All forms of mercury can cause kidney damage when exposures occur at high concentrations.

- 34. The State of California has issued several health advisories regarding mercury in skin-lightening products, one of which included the following statement: "Mercury is dangerous. It is found in some skin creams made in Mexico and other countries .... They can poison people in the house, even children who aren't using the creams." (California Department of Public Health, *Mercury in Skin Cream*, available at <a href="https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CCDPHP/DEODC/EHIB/CPE/Pages/MercuryinSkinCream.aspx">https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CCDPHP/DEODC/EHIB/CPE/Pages/MercuryinSkinCream.aspx</a>.)
- 35. The FDA has issued health advisories on skin-lightening products containing mercury. (See, e.g., FDA, *Mercury Poisoning Linked to Skin Products* (Jul. 26, 2016), available at <a href="https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/mercury-poisoning-linked-skin-products?source=govdelivery&utm\_medium=email&utm\_source=govdelivery.">https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/mercury-poisoning-linked-skin-products?source=govdelivery&utm\_medium=email&utm\_source=govdelivery.</a>)
- 36. In November 2018, a coalition of over 50 non-profit organizations sent a public letter to Amazon advising Amazon that skin-lightening products being sold on Amazon.com had tested positive for excessive mercury content. A copy of the letter is available at <a href="https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/program/documents/Amazon Letter 1">https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/program/documents/Amazon Letter 1</a> <a href="https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/program/documents/Amazon Letter 1">https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/program/documents/Amazon Letter 1</a> <a href="https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.sierraclub.org/files/program/documents/Amazon Letter 1">https://www.sierraclub.org/sites/www.s
- 37. One or more of the Products was identified by name in a health advisory or in the November 2018 letter as containing dangerous and unlawful levels of mercury.
- 38. At all times relevant to this Complaint, Amazon has known that the Products contain mercury or mercury compounds, and that the Products thus were adulterated within the meaning of the Sherman Law.
- 39. At all times relevant to this Complaint, Amazon has known that California consumers who purchase the Products and similar skin-lightening products on Amazon's website are exposed to mercury through absorption through the skin, inhalation of vapors, and through ingestion of mercury that is present on the skin, or on other surfaces, by hand-to mouth contact..

1	8. Award the People its cost of suit; and	
2	9. Grant such other and further relief as the Court deems just and proper.	
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4	Dated: January 30, 2025	Respectfully submitted,
5		ROB BONTA Attorney General of California
6		DENNIS L. BECK JR. Acting Senior Assistant Attorney General
7		LAURA J. ZUCKERMAN Supervising Deputy Attorney General
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10		
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