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County of San Francisco
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SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA
COUNTY OF SAN FRANCISCO

EMA BELL,

Plaintiff,

vs.

WALMART INC.,

Defendant.

Case No.:

CGC-25-624452

**COMPLAINT FOR CIVIL PENALTIES AND
INJUNCTIVE RELIEF**

**(Violation of Health & Safety Code § 25249.5 et
seq.)**

Plaintiff Ema Bell ("Plaintiff"), by and through her attorneys, alleges the following cause of action in the public interest of the citizens of the State of California.

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE

1. Plaintiff brings this representative action on behalf of all California citizens to enforce relevant portions of Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act of 1986, codified at the Health and Safety Code § 25249.5 et seq ("Proposition 65"), which reads, in relevant part, "[n]o person in the course of doing business shall knowingly and intentionally expose any individual to a chemical known to the state to cause cancer without first giving clear and reasonable warning to such individual ...". Health & Safety Code § 25249.6.

2. This complaint is a representative action brought by Plaintiff in the public interest of the citizens of the State of California to enforce the People's right to be informed of the health hazards caused by exposure to diethanolamine (DEA), a toxic chemical found in Hairitage edge control hair gels sold, manufactured, and/or distributed by defendant Walmart Inc. ("Walmart" or "Defendant") in California.

1 3. DEA is a harmful chemical known to the State of California to cause cancer. On
2 June 22, 2012, the State of California listed DEA as a chemical known to the State to cause cancer
3 and it has come under the purview of Proposition 65 regulations since that time. Cal. Code Regs.
4 Tit. 27, § 27001(c); Health & Safety Code §§ 25249.8 & 25249.10(b).

5 4. Proposition 65 requires all businesses with ten (10) or more employees that operate
6 within California or sell products therein to comply with Proposition 65 regulations. Included in
7 such regulations is the requirement that businesses must label any product containing a Proposition
8 65-listed chemical that will create an exposure above safe harbor levels with a “clear and
9 reasonable” warning before “knowingly and intentionally” exposing any person to any such listed
10 chemical.

11 5. Proposition 65 allows for civil penalties of up to \$2,500.00 per day per violation
12 for up to 365 days (up to a maximum civil penalty amount per violation of \$912,000.00) to be
13 imposed upon defendants in a civil action for violations of Proposition 65. Health & Safety Code
14 § 25249.7(b). Proposition 65 also allows for any court of competent jurisdiction to enjoin the
15 actions of a defendant which “violate or threaten to violate” the statute. Health & Safety Code §
16 25249.7.

17 6. Plaintiff alleges that Defendant distributes and/or offers for sale in California,
18 without a requisite exposure warning, Hairitage edge control hair gels (the “Products”) that expose
19 persons to DEA when used for their intended purpose.

20 7. Defendant’s failure to warn consumers and other individuals in California of the
21 health hazards associated with exposure to DEA in conjunction with the sale and/or distribution
22 of the Products is a violation of Proposition 65 and subjects Defendant to the enjoinder and civil
23 penalties described herein.

24 8. Plaintiff seeks civil penalties against Defendant for its violations of Proposition 65
25 in accordance with Health and Safety Code § 25249.7(b).

26 9. Plaintiff also seeks injunctive relief, preliminarily and permanently, requiring
27 Defendant to provide purchasers or users of the Products with required warnings related to the
28

1 dangers and health hazards associated with exposure to DEA pursuant to Health and Safety Code
2 § 25249.7(a).

3 10. Plaintiff further seeks a reasonable award of attorney's fees and costs.

4 **PARTIES**

5 11. Plaintiff is a citizen of the State of California acting in the interest of the general
6 public to promote awareness of exposures to toxic chemicals in products sold in California and to
7 improve human health by reducing hazardous substances contained in such items. She brings this
8 action in the public interest pursuant to Health and Safety Code § 25249.7(d).

9 12. Defendant Walmart Inc., through its business, effectively imports, distributes, sells,
10 and/or offers the Products for sale or use in the State of California, or it implies by its conduct that
11 it imports, distributes, sells, and/or offers the Products for sale or use in the State of California.
12 Plaintiff alleges that defendant Walmart Inc. is a "person" in the course of doing business within
13 the meaning of Health & Safety Code sections 25249.6 and 25249.11.

14 **VENUE AND JURISDICTION**

15 13. Venue is proper in the County of San Francisco because one or more of the
16 instances of wrongful conduct occurred, and continue to occur in this county and/or because
17 Defendant conducted, and continues to conduct, business in the County of San Francisco with
18 respect to the Products.

19 14. This Court has jurisdiction over this action pursuant to California Constitution
20 Article VI, § 10, which grants the Superior Court original jurisdiction in all causes except those
21 given by statute to other trial courts. Health and Safety Code § 25249.7 allows for the enforcement
22 of violations of Proposition 65 in any Court of competent jurisdiction; therefore, this Court has
23 jurisdiction over this lawsuit.

24 15. This Court has jurisdiction over Defendant because Defendant is either a citizen of
25 the State of California, has sufficient minimum contacts with the State of California, is registered
26 with the California Secretary of State as foreign corporations authorized to do business in the State
27 of California, and/or has otherwise purposefully availed itself of the California market. Such
28

1 purposeful availment has rendered the exercise of jurisdiction by California courts consistent and
2 permissible with traditional notions of fair play and substantial justice.

3 STATUTORY BACKGROUND

4 16. The people of the State of California declared in Proposition 65 their right “[t]o be
5 informed about exposures to chemicals that cause cancer, birth defects, or other reproductive
6 harm.” (Section 1(b) of Initiative Measure, Proposition 65.)

7 17. To effect this goal, Proposition 65 requires that individuals be provided with a
8 “clear and reasonable warning” before being exposed to substances listed by the State of California
9 as causing cancer and birth defects or other reproductive harm. H&S Code § 25249.6 states, in
10 pertinent part:

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

13 18. An exposure to a chemical in a consumer product is one “which results from a
14 person’s acquisition, purchase, storage, consumption or other reasonably foreseeable use of a
15 consumer good, or any exposure that results from receiving a consumer service.” (27 CCR §
16 25602, para (b).) H&S Code § 25603(c) states that “a person in the course of doing business ...
17 shall provide a warning to any person to whom the product is sold or transferred unless the product
18 is packaged or labeled with a clear and reasonable warning.”

19 19. Pursuant to H&S Code § 25603.1, the warning may be provided by using one or
20 more of the following methods individually or in combination:¹

- 21 a. A warning that appears on a product’s label or other labeling.
22 b. Identification of the product at the retail outlet in a manner which provides
23 a warning. Identification may be through shelf labeling, signs, menus, or a combination
24 thereof.
25

26
27 ¹ Alternatively, a person in the course of doing business may elect to comply with the warning
28 requirements set out in the amended version of 27 CCR 25601, *et.seq.* as amended on August 30,
2016, and operative on August 30, 2018.

c. The warnings provided pursuant to subparagraphs (a) and (b) shall be prominently placed upon a product's labels or other labeling or displayed at the retail outlet with such conspicuousness, as compared with other words, statements, designs, or devices in the label, labeling or display as to render it likely to be read and understood by an ordinary individual under customary conditions of purchase or use.

20. Proposition 65 provides that any “person who violates or threatens to violate” the statute may be enjoined in a court of competent jurisdiction. (H&S Code § 25249.7.) The phrase “threaten to violate” is defined to mean creating “a condition in which there is a substantial probability that a violation will occur.” (H&S Code § 25249.11(e).) Violators are liable for civil penalties of up to \$2,500.00 per day for each violation of the Act (H&S Code § 25249.7) for up to 365 days (up to a maximum civil penalty amount per violation of \$912,000.00).

21. On June 22, 2012, the State of California listed DEA as a chemical known to the State to cause cancer and it has come under the purview of Proposition 65 regulations since that time. Cal. Code Regs. Tit. 27, § 27001(c); Health & Safety Code §§ 25249.8 & 25249.10(b).

23. Defendant has manufactured, processed, marketed, distributed, offered to sell and/or sold the Products in California since at least April 17, 2024. The Products continue to be distributed and sold in California without the requisite warning information.

1 25. As a proximate result of acts by Defendant, as a person in the course of doing
2 business within the meaning of H&S Code § 25249.11, individuals throughout the State of
3 California, including in San Francisco County, have been exposed to DEA without a clear and
4 reasonable warning on the Products. The individuals subject to the violative exposures include
5 normal and foreseeable users and consumers that use the Products, as well as all others exposed to
6 the Products.

7 **SATISFACTION OF NOTICE REQUIREMENTS**

8 26. Plaintiff purchased the Product from Walmart. At the time of purchase, Defendant
9 did not provide a Proposition 65 exposure warning for DEA or any other Proposition 65 listed
10 chemical in a manner consistent with H&S Code § 25603.1 as described *supra*.

11 27. The Product was sent to a testing laboratory for diethanolamine to determine the
12 DEA content of the Product.

13 28. The laboratory provided the results of its analysis. Results of this test determined
14 the Product exposes users to DEA (the “Chemical Test Report”).

15 29. Plaintiff provided the Chemical Test Report and Product to an analytical chemist
16 to determine if, based on the findings of the Chemical Test Report and the reasonable and
17 foreseeable use of the Product, exposure to DEA will occur at levels that require Proposition 65
18 warnings under the Clear and Reasonable Warnings section 25601 of Title 27 of the California
19 Code of Regulations.

20 30. On April 17, 2024, Plaintiff received from the analytical chemist an exposure
21 assessment report which concluded that persons in California who use the Products will be exposed
22 to levels of DEA that require a Proposition 65 exposure warning.

23 31. On April 17, 2024, Plaintiff gave notice of alleged violation of Health and Safety
24 Code § 25249.6 (the “Notice”) to Defendant concerning the exposure of California citizens to DEA
25 from use of the Products without proper warning, subject to a private action to Defendant and to
26 the California Attorney General’s office and the offices of the County District attorneys and City
27 Attorneys for each city with a population greater than 750,000 persons wherein the herein
28 violations allegedly occurred.

32. The Notice complied with all procedural requirements of Proposition 65 including the attachment of a Certificate of Merit affirming that Plaintiff's counsel had consulted with at least one person with relevant and appropriate expertise who reviewed relevant data regarding DEA exposure, and that counsel believed there was meritorious and reasonable cause for a private action.

33. After receiving the Notice, and to Plaintiff's best information and belief, none of the noticed appropriate public enforcement agencies have commenced and diligently prosecuted a cause of action against Defendant under Proposition 65 to enforce the alleged violations which are the subject of the Notice.

34. Plaintiff is commencing this action more than sixty (60) days from the date of the Notice to Defendant, as required by law.

FIRST CAUSE OF ACTION

(By Plaintiff against Defendant for the Violation of Proposition 65)

35. Plaintiff hereby repeats and incorporates by reference paragraphs 1 through 34 of this Complaint as though fully set forth herein.

36. Defendant has, at all times mentioned herein, acted as distributor, and/or retailer of the Products.

37. Use of the Products will expose users and consumers thereof to DEA, a hazardous chemical found on the Proposition 65 list of chemicals known to be hazardous to human health.

38. The Products do not comply with the Proposition 65 warning requirements.

39. Plaintiff, based on her best information and belief, avers that at all relevant times herein, and at least since April 17, 2024, continuing until the present, that Defendant has continued to knowingly and intentionally expose California users and consumers of the Products to DEA without providing required warnings under Proposition 65.

1 40. The exposures that are the subject of the Notice result from the purchase,
2 acquisition, handling and recommended use of the Product. The primary route of exposure to DEA
3 is through dermal exposure. Some amount of exposure through ingestion can occur by touching
4 the Product with subsequent touching of the user's hand to mouth. No clear and reasonable warning
5 is provided with the Products regarding the health hazards of exposure to DEA.

6 41. Plaintiff, based on her best information and belief, avers that such exposures will
7 continue every day until clear and reasonable warnings are provided to purchasers and users or
8 until this known toxic chemical is removed from the Products.

9 42. Defendant has knowledge that the normal and reasonably foreseeable use of the
10 Products exposes individuals to DEA, and Defendant intends that exposures to DEA will occur by
11 its deliberate, non-accidental participation in the importation, distribution, sale and offering of the
12 Products to consumers in California

13 43. Plaintiff has engaged in good faith efforts to resolve the herein claims prior to this
14 Complaint.

15 44. Pursuant to Health and Safety Code § 25249.7(b), as a consequence of the above
16 described acts, Defendant is liable for a maximum civil penalty of \$2,500 per day per violation.

17 45. Pursuant to Health and Safety Code § 25249.7(a), this Court is specifically
18 authorized to grant injunctive relief in favor of Plaintiff and against Defendant.

1 **PRAYER FOR RELIEF**

2 WHEREFORE, Plaintiff demands judgment against Defendant and requests the following
3 relief:

4 A. That the court assess civil penalties against Defendant in the amount of \$2,500 per
5 day for each violation for up to 365 days (up to a maximum civil penalty amount per
6 violation of \$912,000.00) in accordance with Health and Safety Code § 25249.7(b);

7 B. That the court preliminarily and permanently enjoin Defendant mandating
8 Proposition 65 compliant warnings on the Products;

9 C. That the court grant Plaintiff reasonable attorney's fees and costs of suit, in the
10 amount of \$50,000.00.

11 D. That the court grant any further relief as may be just and proper.

12 Dated: April 16, 2025

BRODSKY SMITH

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