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Attorney for Plaintiff Jesse Helems

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
 FOR THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF CALIFORNIA**

JESSE HELEMS, *on behalf of all those*)
similarly situated,)

Plaintiff,)

No. **'22CV1419 RBM JLB**

v.)

CLASS ACTION COMPLAINT

DRIP DROP HYDRATION, INC., *a*)
Delaware corporation,)

JURY TRIAL DEMANDED

Defendant.)

 Jesse Helems ("Plaintiff"), individually and on behalf of all others similarly situated, by and through undersigned counsel, hereby brings this action against Drip Drop Hydration, Inc. ("Defendant" or "Drip Drop"), alleging that certain products manufactured, packaged, labeled, advertised, distributed and sold by Defendant are misbranded and falsely advertised in California and nationwide and otherwise violate California law, and upon information and belief and investigation of counsel alleges as follows:

PARTIES

1. Plaintiff Jesse Helems is and at all times relevant was a citizen of California, domiciled in San Diego, California.

1 that offers the Products for sale to commercial and individual consumers in this district, as well
 2 as offering the Products for sale through third-party e-commerce websites, through both of
 3 which commercial and individual consumers residing in this district have purchased the
 4 Products.

5
 6 9. Defendant knowingly directs electronic activity and ships the Products into this
 7 district with the intent to engage in business interactions for profit, and it has in fact engaged in
 8 such interactions, including the sale of the Products to Plaintiff.

9
 10 10. Defendant also sells the Products to retailers and wholesalers in this district for
 11 the purpose of making the Products available for purchase by individual consumers in this
 12 district.

13 11. Plaintiff's losses and those of other Class members were sustained in this district.

14 12. Venue is proper pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1391(b)(2) because a substantial part of
 15 the events or omissions giving rise to Plaintiff's claims occurred within this district.

16 13. Venue is also proper pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1391(c)(2) because this Court
 17 maintains personal jurisdiction over Defendant.

18 **FACTUAL ALLEGATIONS**

19 **A. Consumers Will Pay A Premium for "Clean Labels."**

20 14. Across the globe, consumers are increasingly attuned to claims that foods are "all-
 21 natural," minimally processed, or otherwise free of artificial flavors and preservatives.

22 15. For example, a 2018 survey by L.E.K. Consulting found that overwhelming
 23 numbers of consumers were committed or casual adherents to so-called "clean label" food
 24 attributes: "No artificial ingredients" (69 percent); "No preservatives" (67 percent); or "All-
 25 natural" (66 percent). These were the three most attractive attributes in the consumer survey.
 26 Roughly 60 to 70 percent of consumers reported a willingness to pay a price premium for "clean
 27 label" foods. See <https://www.lek.com/insights/ei/next-generation-mindful-food-consumption>.
 28

1 16. This consumer preference has led to an explosion in the category of “clean label”
2 foods and beverages. Leading analyst Allied Market Research estimated that the “natural foods
3 and drinks” category would grow by an estimated compound annual growth rate of 13.7 percent
4 from 2016 to 2023, reaching \$191 billion in annual sales by 2023. See
5 <https://www.alliedmarketresearch.com/natural-food-and-drinks-market>.
6

7 17. According to Nielsen, more than 40 percent of consumers rate the absence of
8 artificial flavors in their foods as important to them when deciding between competing products,
9 and more than 60 percent try to avoid artificial flavors at least some of the time.

10 18. Consumers also have a specific sense of the attributes of “natural” foods. Research
11 by Consumer Reports indicates that nearly 90 percent of consumers believe and expect that
12 foods described as “natural” should contain no artificial ingredients.
13

14 **B. Defendant’s Use of Synthetic Flavorings.**

15 19. Defendant Drip Drop Hydration, Inc. formulates, manufactures, and sells a line of
16 “Oral Rehydration Solutions” or “ORS” powders that are meant to replace electrolytes and
17 rehydrate after workouts in order to support workout, bodybuilding, and other health and fitness
18 goals. These supplements come in powdered form in individually wrapped packets and are
19 meant to be dissolved in water before drinking.

20 20. On or about May 4, 2022, Helems purchased three 32-count containers of Drip
21 Drop’s ORS powders from third party retailer Amazon.com (Order Nos. 112-1057046-9429062
22 and 112-0962997-7449055). Helems purchased the concord grape, pineapple coconut, and acai
23 flavors. Together, these items are referred to throughout this Complaint as “the Products.”
24

25 21. To appeal to consumers who seek out natural food products and are willing to pay
26 more for them, Defendant labels and advertises the Products as if they were exclusively naturally
27 flavored.
28

22. For example, the labels of the Products purchased by Plaintiff includes a depiction of the fruits that purportedly provide the characterizing flavor:





23. Drip Drop's website, as to each of the Products, repeats these depictions of fruits being poured into water to emphasize the purported natural flavors of the Products, as in this example:



See <https://www.dripdrop.com/products/dripdrop/acai-8-32> (last visited September 13, 2022).

24. The Amazon web pages maintained by Drip Drop for the Products use similar depictions of fruits, as in this example:



See <https://www.amazon.com/DripDrop-ORS-Juicy-Classics-Electrolyte/dp/B094Q9B9GZ/> (last visited September 13, 2022).

25. Drip Drop highlights its use of “natural” ingredients in other contexts as well, including an FAQ where it asserts that it uses zinc aspartate, a “naturally occurring amino acid,” instead of aspartame, an artificial sweetener. See <https://www.dripdrop.com/faq> (last visited July 27, 2022).

26. By using depictions of fruits on the packages, Drip Drop signals to consumers, and consumers reasonably understand Drip Drop to be claiming, that the Products are flavored only by the depicted fruits. These claims made on the labels and associated marketing materials of the Products are false. The Products are artificially flavored.

1 27. Each of the Products contains an ingredient identified as “malic acid.” While there
2 is a naturally occurring form of malic acid, it is extremely expensive to formulate in the large
3 quantities and is almost never used in mass-produced food products. Instead, testing conducted
4 by an independent third-party laboratory has confirmed that the malic acid that Defendant uses
5 in these Products is DL malic acid, a synthetic substance derived from petrochemicals.¹
6

7 28. This type of malic acid is manufactured in petrochemical plants from benzene or
8 butane—components of gasoline and lighter fluid, respectively—through a series of chemical
9 reactions, some of which involve highly toxic chemical precursors and byproducts.

10 29. Fruit flavors in a food are imparted by the interactions between sugars, acids,
11 lipids, and various volatile compounds. The sweetness or tartness of a fruit flavor is determined
12 by the ratio between the sugars (mainly glucose and fructose) and acids, such as citric and malic
13 acid.
14

15 30. The quality and consumer acceptability of fruit flavors is based on their perceived
16 sweetness and tartness, which in turn is driven by the ratio between sugars and acids. Fruits such
17 as acai berries, concord grapes, pineapples, and coconuts have their own natural ratio of sugars
18 and acids.

19 31. The malic acid used in the Products is used to create, enhance, simulate, and/or
20 reinforce the sweet and tart taste that consumers associate with the fruits that are depicted on the
21 Products’ labels, such as acai berries, concord grapes, pineapples, and coconuts.
22

23 32. Defendant uses the petrochemical-derived DL malic acid in its Products to create
24 this sweet and tart flavor but pretends otherwise, conflating natural and artificial flavorings,
25 misbranding the Products and deceiving consumers.
26
27

28

¹ DL malic acid is also called d-hydroxybutanedioic acid or (R)-(+)-2-Hydroxysuccinic acid.

1 33. The ingredients on the Products' label are declared in a way that is misleading and
2 contrary to law, because Defendant designates the ingredient by its generic name, "malic acid,"
3 instead of by its specific name, "DL malic acid."

4 **C. Requirements for Labelling**

5 34. California's Sherman Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Law, Cal. Health & Saf. Code §
6 109875, et seq., incorporates all food flavoring and additive regulations of the Federal Food,
7 Drug, and Cosmetic Act ("FDCA"). The regulations require that a food's label accurately
8 describe the nature of the food product and its characterizing flavors. 21 C.F.R. § 102.5(a).
9

10 35. Artificial flavor is defined as "any substance, the function of which is to impart
11 flavor, which is not derived from a spice, fruit or fruit juice, vegetable or vegetable juice, edible
12 yeast, herb, bark, bud, root, leaf or similar plant material, meat, fish, poultry, eggs, dairy
13 products, or fermentation products thereof." 21 C.F.R § 101.22(a)(1).
14

15 36. Natural flavor is defined as "essential oil, oleoresin, essence or extractive, protein
16 hydrolysate, distillate, or any product of roasting, heating or enzymolysis, which contains the
17 flavoring constituents" from fruits or vegetables, "whose significant function in food is flavoring
18 rather than nutritional." 21 C.F.R § 101.22(a)(3).
19

20 37. Any recognizable primary flavor identified directly or indirectly on the front label
21 of a food Product, whether by word, vignette, **depiction of a fruit**, or other means is referred to
22 as a "characterizing flavor." 21 C.F.R. § 101.22 (emphasis added).
23

24 38. Here, the Products' labels both state the characterizing flavors (acai berries,
25 concord grapes, pineapples, and coconuts) and reinforce the statement of the characterizing
26 flavor by depiction of fruits.

27 39. If a food product's characterizing flavor is not created exclusively by the named
28 flavor ingredient, the product's front label must state that the product's flavor was simulated or

1 reinforced with either natural or artificial flavorings or both. If any artificial flavor is present
2 which “simulates, resembles or reinforces” the characterizing flavor, the front label must
3 prominently inform consumers that the product is “Artificially Flavored.” 21 C.F.R. §
4 101.22(i)(2).

5
6 40. A food product’s label also must include a statement of the “presence or absence
7 of any characterizing ingredient(s) or component(s) . . . when the presence or absence of such
8 ingredient(s) or component(s) in the food has a material bearing on price or consumer
9 acceptance . . . and consumers may otherwise be misled about the presence or absence of the
10 ingredient(s) or component(s) in the food.” 21 C.F.R. § 102.5.

11 41. Such statement must be in boldface print on the front display panel and of
12 sufficient size for an average consumer to notice.

13
14 42. By changing the ratio between sugars and acids that is naturally found in fruits
15 such as blood oranges, the DL malic acid used in the Product reinforces, stimulates, or enhances
16 the characterizing flavors, regardless of any other effect it may have or purpose for which it was
17 included.

18 43. DL malic acid is not a “natural flavor” as this term is defined by federal and state
19 regulations and is not derived from a fruit or vegetable or any other natural source. The Products
20 therefore contain artificial flavorings.

21
22 44. Because the Products contain artificial flavoring, California law requires the
23 Products to display both front- and back-label disclosures to inform consumers that the Products
24 are artificially flavored.

25 45. The Products have none of the required disclosures regarding the use of artificial
26 flavors.

1 46. Plaintiff reserves the right to amend this Complaint to add other substantially
2 similar products that contain similar label misrepresentations as testing continues.

3 47. Labels are the chief means by which food product manufacturers convey critical
4 information to consumers, and consumers have been conditioned to rely on the accuracy of the
5 claims made on these labels. As the California Supreme Court stated in a case involving alleged
6 violations of the UCL and FAL, “Simply stated: labels matter. The marketing industry is based
7 on the premise that labels matter, that consumers will choose one product over another similar
8 product based on its label.” *Kwikset Corp. v. Superior Court*, 51 Cal.4th 310, 328 (2011).

9
10 48. Given the Defendant’s advertising material and other assurances, consumers
11 including Plaintiff would reasonably understand Defendant’s statements to mean that each
12 Products were free of artificial flavorings as advertised and represented. These statements were
13 false.
14

15 49. Consumers including Plaintiff would reasonably rely on Defendant’s statements
16 such that they would not have purchased the Products from Defendant if the truth about the
17 products’ flavoring were known, or would have only been willing to pay a substantially reduced
18 price for the Products had they known that Defendant’s representations were false and
19 misleading.
20

21 50. Consumers including Plaintiff especially rely on the claims made by food product
22 manufacturers such as Drip Drop. In fact, they have no way of judging the accuracy of the
23 flavoring claims made on the Products’ labelling simply by viewing or even consuming the
24 Products.

25 51. Plaintiff suffered economic injury by Defendant’s fraudulent and deceptive
26 conduct as stated herein, and there is a causal nexus between Defendant’s deceptive conduct and
27 Plaintiff’s injury.
28

1 **CLASS ACTION ALLEGATIONS**

2 52. Plaintiff brings this action individually and as representative of all those similarly
3 situated pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 23 on behalf of all persons with the United
4 States who purchased the Products within four years prior to the filing of this Complaint.

5 53. Excluded from the Class are Defendant and its affiliates, parents, subsidiaries,
6 employees, officers, agents, and directors. Also excluded are any judicial officers presiding over
7 this matter and the members of their immediate families and judicial staff.
8

9 54. Plaintiff reserves the right to alter the Class definition, and to amend this
10 Complaint to add Subclasses, as necessary to the full extent permitted by applicable law.

11 55. Certification of Plaintiff's claims for class-wide treatment is appropriate because
12 Plaintiff can prove the elements of the claims on a class-wide basis using the same evidence as
13 individual Class members would use to prove those elements in individual actions alleging the
14 same claims.
15

16 56. **Numerosity – Rule 23(a)(1):** The size of the Class is so large that joinder of all
17 Class members is impracticable. Plaintiff believes and avers there are thousands of Class
18 members geographically dispersed throughout the Nation.

19 57. **Existence and Predominance of Common Questions of Law and Fact – Rule**
20 **23(a)(2), (b)(3):** There are questions of law and fact common to the Class. These questions
21 predominate over any questions that affect only individual Class members. Common legal and
22 factual questions and issues include but are not limited to:
23

- 24 a. Whether the marketing, advertising, packaging, labeling, and other promotional
25 materials for the Products is misleading and deceptive;
26
27
28

- b. Whether a reasonable consumer would understand the Products' labelling to indicate that the Products contained only natural flavorings, and reasonably relied upon those representations;
- c. Whether Defendant was unjustly enriched at the expense of the Plaintiff and Class members;
- d. the proper amount of damages and disgorgement or restitution;
- e. the proper scope of injunctive relief; and
- f. the proper amount of attorneys' fees.

58. Defendant engaged in a common course of conduct in contravention of the laws Plaintiff seeks to enforce individually and on behalf of the Class. Similar or identical violations of law, business practices, and injuries are involved. Individual questions, if any, pale by comparison, in both quality and quantity, to the numerous common questions that predominate this action. The common questions will yield common answers that will substantially advance the resolution of the case.

59. In short, these common questions of fact and law predominate over questions that affect only individual Class members.

60. **Typicality – Rule 23(a)(3):** Plaintiff's claims are typical of the claims of the Class members because they are based on the same underlying facts, events, and circumstances relating to Defendant's conduct.

61. Specifically, all Class members, including Plaintiff, were harmed in the same way due to Defendant's uniform misconduct described herein; all Class members suffered similar economic injury due to Defendant's misrepresentations; and Plaintiff seeks the same relief as the Class members.

1 62. There are no defenses available to Defendant that are unique to the named
2 Plaintiff.

3 63. **Adequacy of Representation – Rule 23(a)(4):** Plaintiff is a fair and adequate
4 representatives of the Class because Plaintiff's interests do not conflict with the Class members'
5 interests. Plaintiff will prosecute this action vigorously and is highly motivated to seek redress
6 against Defendant.
7

8 64. Furthermore, Plaintiff has selected competent counsel who are experienced in
9 class action and other complex litigation. Plaintiff and Plaintiff's counsel are committed to
10 prosecuting this action vigorously on behalf of the Class and have the resources to do so.

11 65. **Superiority – Rule 23(b)(3):** The class action mechanism is superior to other
12 available means for the fair and efficient adjudication of this controversy for at least the
13 following reasons:
14

- 15 a. the damages individual Class members suffered are small compared to the burden
16 and expense of individual prosecution of the complex and extensive litigation
17 needed to address Defendant's conduct such that it would be virtually impossible
18 for the Class members individually to redress the wrongs done to them. In fact,
19 they would have little incentive to do so given the amount of damage each member
20 has suffered when weighed against the costs and burdens of litigation;
21
- 22 b. the class procedure presents fewer management difficulties than individual
23 litigation and provides the benefits of single adjudication, economies of scale, and
24 supervision by a single Court;
- 25 c. the prosecution of separate actions by individual Class members would create a
26 risk of inconsistent or varying adjudications, which would establish incompatible
27 standards of conduct for Defendant; and
28

d. the prosecution of separate actions by individual Class members would create a risk of adjudications with respect to them that would be dispositive of the interests of other Class members or would substantively impair or impede their ability to protect their interests.

66. Unless the Class is certified, Defendant will retain monies received as a result of its unlawful and deceptive conduct alleged herein.

67. Unless a class-wide injunction is issued, Defendant will likely continue to advertise, market, promote, and sell the Products in an unlawful and misleading manner, as described throughout this Complaint, and members of the Class will continue to be misled, harmed, and denied their rights under the law.

68. **Ascertainability.** To the extent ascertainability is required, the Class members are readily ascertainable from Defendant's records and/or its agents' records of retail and online sales, as well as through public notice.

69. Defendant has acted on grounds applicable to the Class as a whole, thereby making appropriate final injunctive and declaratory relief concerning the Class as a whole.

COUNT 1
VIOLATION OF CALIFORNIA BUSINESS & PROFESSIONS CODE
SECTION 17200 *et seq.* — "UNFAIR" CONDUCT

70. Plaintiff realleges the preceding paragraphs as if fully set forth herein.

71. Plaintiff has standing to pursue this claim as Plaintiff has suffered injury in fact as a result of Defendant's actions as set forth herein.

72. Defendant's actions as alleged in this Complaint constitute "unfair" conduct within the meaning of California Business and Professions Code Section 17200, *et seq.*

73. Defendant's business practices, as alleged herein, are "unfair" because it fails to disclose accurately the synthetic flavoring used in the Products.

1 83. Defendant's wrongful business practices alleged herein constituted, and continue
2 to constitute, a continuing course of unfair competition since it continues to market and sell its
3 products in a manner that offends public policy and/or in a fashion that is immoral, unethical,
4 oppressive, unscrupulous and/or substantially injurious to its customers.

5 84. Defendant publicly disseminated untrue or misleading representations regarding
6 the flavoring of its Products, which it knew, or in the exercise of reasonable care should have
7 known, were untrue or misleading.

8 85. Pursuant to Business and Professions Code § 17203, Plaintiff seeks an order of
9 this Court enjoining Defendant from continuing to engage in "fraudulent" business practices
10 and any other act prohibited by law, including those acts set forth in this Complaint, and further
11 seeks all other relief allowable under Business and Professions Code Section 17200, *et seq.*
12

13
14 **COUNT 3**
15 **VIOLATION OF CALIFORNIA BUSINESS & PROFESSIONS CODE**
16 **SECTION 17200 *et seq.* — "UNLAWFUL" CONDUCT**

17 86. Plaintiff reallege the preceding paragraphs as if fully set forth herein.

18 87. Plaintiff has standing to pursue this claim as Plaintiff has suffered injury in fact as
19 a result of Defendant's actions as set forth above.

20 88. Defendant's actions as alleged in this Complaint constitute "unlawful" conduct
21 within the meaning of California Business and Professions Code Section 17200, *et seq.*

22 89. Defendant's business practices, as alleged herein, are "unlawful" because it fails
23 to disclose accurately that the Products contained artificial flavorings.

24 90. As a result of this "unlawful" conduct, Plaintiff expended money and engaged in
25 activities it would not otherwise have spent or conducted.

26 91. Defendant's business practices alleged herein constituted, and continue to
27 constitute, a continuing course of unfair competition since it continues to market and sell its
28

1 products in a manner that offends public policy and/or in a fashion that is immoral, unethical,
2 oppressive, unscrupulous and/or substantially injurious to its customers.

3 92. Defendant publicly disseminated untrue or misleading representations regarding
4 the flavoring of its Products, which it knew, or in the exercise of reasonable care should have
5 known, were untrue or misleading.
6

7 93. Pursuant to Business and Professions Code Section 17203, Plaintiff seeks an order
8 of this court enjoining Defendant from continuing to engage in “unlawful” business practices
9 and any other act prohibited by law, including those acts set forth in this Complaint, and further
10 seeks all other relief allowable under Business and Professions Code Section 17200, *et seq.*
11

12 **COUNT 4**
13 **VIOLATION OF CALIFORNIA BUSINESS &**
14 **PROFESSIONS CODE SECTION 17500 *et seq.***

15 94. Plaintiff realleges the preceding paragraphs as if fully set forth herein.

16 95. Plaintiff has standing to pursue this claim as Plaintiff has suffered injury in fact as
17 a result of Defendant’s actions as set forth above.

18 96. Defendant engaged in advertising and marketing to the public and offered for sale
19 advertising services on a nationwide basis, including in California.

20 97. Defendant engaged in the advertising and marketing alleged herein with the intent
21 to directly or indirectly induce the sale of the Products to consumers.

22 98. Defendant’s advertisements and marketing representations regarding the
23 characteristics of the Products were false, misleading, and deceptive as set forth above.

24 99. At the time it made and disseminated the statements alleged herein, Defendant
25 knew or should have known that the statements were untrue or misleading, and acted in violation
26 of Business and Professions Code Section 17500, *et seq.*
27
28

1 d. Defendant's acts and practices fail to represent that transactions involving its
2 Products involve actions that are prohibited by law, particularly the use of
3 misleading nutritional labelling; and

4 e. Defendant's acts and practices constitute representations that its Products have
5 been supplied in accordance with previous representations when they were not.
6

7 107. By reason of the foregoing, Plaintiff and the Class have been irreparably harmed,
8 entitling them to injunctive relief, disgorgement, and restitution.

9 108. Pursuant to Cal. Civ. Code § 1782, Plaintiff notified Defendant in writing of the
10 particular violations of the CLRA described herein and demanded Defendant rectify the actions
11 described above by providing complete monetary relief, agreeing to be bound by their legal
12 obligations and to give notice to all affected customers of their intent to do so. Plaintiff sent this
13 notice by certified mail to Defendant's principal place of business, at least 30 days before the
14 filing of this Complaint.
15

16 109. Pursuant to Cal. Civ. Code §§ 1770 and 1780, Plaintiff and the Class are entitled
17 to recover actual damages sustained as a result of Defendant's violations of the CLRA. Such
18 damages include, without limitation, monetary losses and actual, punitive, and consequential
19 damages, in an amount to be proven at trial.
20

21 110. Pursuant to Cal. Civ. Code §§ 1770 and 1780, Plaintiff is entitled to enjoin
22 publication of misleading and deceptive nutritional labels on Defendant's Products and to
23 recover reasonable attorneys' fees and costs.

24 **COUNT 6**
25 **UNJUST ENRICHMENT**

26 111. Plaintiff realleges the preceding paragraphs as if fully set forth herein and, to the
27 extent necessary, pleads this cause of action in the alternative.
28

- 1 c. Awarding actual and other damages as permitted by law, and/or ordering an
2 accounting by Defendant for any and all profits derived by Defendant from the
3 unlawful, unfair, and/or fraudulent conduct and/or business practices alleged herein;
4
5 d. Ordering an awarding of injunctive relief as permitted by law or equity, including
6 enjoining Defendant from continuing the unlawful practices as set forth herein, and
7 ordering Defendant to engage in a corrective advertising campaign;
8
9 e. Ordering Defendant to pay attorneys' fees and litigation costs to Plaintiff pursuant to
10 California Code of Civil Procedure Section 1021.5 and the common-law private-
11 attorney-general doctrine;
12
13 f. Ordering Defendant to pay both pre- and post-judgment interest on any amounts
14 awarded; and
15
16 g. Such other relief as the Court may deem just and proper.

17 TRIAL BY JURY IS DEMANDED.

18 /s/ Charles C. Weller
19 Charles C. Weller (Cal. SBN: 207034)
20 Attorney for Plaintiff

21 September 20, 2022
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ClassAction.org

This complaint is part of ClassAction.org's searchable class action lawsuit database and can be found in this post: [Drip Drop Hydration Powders Not as Naturally Flavored as Product Labels Suggest, Class Action Says](#)
