

Beer drinkers accuse Anheuser-Busch of watering down brews

By Stuart Pfeifer, Los Angeles Times

Beer drinkers in three U.S. states filed lawsuits accusing brewing giant Anheuser-Busch of watering down and mislabeling Budweiser, Michelob and other brands to cut costs.

The lawsuits, filed in the last week in California, Pennsylvania and New Jersey, said the brewing giant cheated consumers by listing a higher alcohol content than the beers actually contained.



Ten Anheuser-Busch products were named in the lawsuits: Budweiser, Michelob, Michelob Ultra, Bud Ice, Bud Light Platinum, Hurricane High Gravity Lager, King Cobra, Busch Ice, Natural Ice and Bud Light Lime.

Former employees at the company's 13 breweries – including some in high-level positions – are cooperating with the plaintiffs, said San Rafael lawyer Josh Boxer, the lead attorney in the case.

“Our information comes from former employees at Anheuser-Busch, who have informed us that as a matter of corporate practice, all of their products [mentioned in the lawsuit] are watered down,” Boxer said, according to the *Associated Press*. “It’s a simple cost-saving measure, and it’s very significant.”

The excess water is added just before bottling and cuts the

stated alcohol content by 3 to 8 percent, he said.

Anheuser-Busch InBev called the claims “groundless” and said its beers fully comply with labeling laws.

“Our beers are in full compliance with all alcohol labeling laws. We proudly adhere to the highest standards in brewing our beers, which have made them the best-selling in the U.S. and the world,” Peter Kraemer, vice president of brewing and supply, said in a statement.

Anheuser-Busch, based in St. Louis, Mo., merged with InBev in 2008 to form the world’s largest alcohol producer, headquartered in Belgium. In 2011, the company produced 22 billion gallons of alcoholic beverages, 3 billion of them in the U.S., and reported \$22 billion in profits, the lawsuit said.

According to the lawsuit, the company has sophisticated equipment that measures the alcohol content throughout the brewing process and is accurate to within one-hundredth of a percent. But after the merger, the company increasingly chose to dilute its popular brands of beer, the lawsuit alleged.

“Following the merger, AB vigorously accelerated the deceptive practices ... sacrificing the quality products once produced by Anheuser-Busch in order to reduce costs,” said the lead lawsuit, filed Friday in federal court in San Francisco.

Boxer told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that the plaintiffs did not independently test the alcohol content in the beers. That was a significant omission, said Eric Shepard, executive editor of Beer Marketer’s Insights.

“Right now, I’m skeptical,” Shepard told the Post-Dispatch. “Brewers and other large companies are often the targets of class-action lawsuits, and A-B wouldn’t have had its vice president of brewing Peter Kraemer come out with their statement if they weren’t confident in their standing.”