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Coating company all aglow over 'world first' fabric



The Speciality Group product development manager Tom McGuinness swathed in Energlo fabric.
Photo: *Michael Clayton-Jones*

By Renee Switzer
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DANIEL Leipnik takes people into dark places to see his new product. Once the lights are switched off people go nuts, he says.

But the glow-in-the-dark fabric by Melbourne textile coating company The Speciality Group might be more than just a talking point. The company hopes the fabric will increase safety for emergency service workers and cyclists.

The fabric, named Energlo, glows in the dark for up to three hours after 12 minutes' exposure to natural light, according to Mr Leipnik, vice-president of international sales and marketing.

Speaking from the company's office in Canada, Mr Leipnik claims the fabric is a "world first innovation".

"People have tried to come up with this technology with dyes that are available but wash off, and also with other different treatments, but nothing that is a waterproof breathable glow in the dark product that retains its glowing capabilities," he says.

The technology involves photo-luminescent crystals the size of sand particles. These are poured into a waterproof breathable coating formulation. The base fabric is imported from Taiwan and then coated at the company's Melbourne mill.

Mr Leipnik envisions the fabric will be used in safety gear. "If you're a police officer working on a country road where there's no lights at all and you have one to three hours of a glowing jacket and pants — that can be enough to save a life," he says.

"If you are lost at sea or even in the back country of a mountain and it turns to night, a person wearing clothing or a backpack that lights up in the dark may just stand out long enough for search and rescue teams to find them."

The other emerging market appears to be cycling and running, especially in North America. The company is conducting a factory trial for Canadian sports clothing company Sugoi.

Bicycle Victoria general manager Harry Barber believes cyclists in Australia may be interested in glow-in-the-dark clothing, but said bicycle lights were the key to visibility at night.

"If you want to add anything in any way that's fine, but I'd be concerned about anything that might make people think they don't need lights," he says.

Mr Barber believes the fabric will appeal to serious riders who want glow-in-the-dark clothing or to add patches.

"Some of the reflective materials at the moment are hard to sew on so if it's easy to sew I expect it would be quite popular," he says.

Westbeach Sports, a Canadian snowboard outwear brand, has signed a deal with exclusive rights to Energlo for the winter 06-07 season.

Westbeach will launch its Energlo piece, the Phenom Jacket, in September.

Mr Leipnik says about 20 brands have signed contracts, including Quiksilver, Swedish company SOS Sportswear, British companies Sprayway and Karrimor and workwear company Cosalt.

"The Israeli ambulance service and the city of Vancouver's parking enforcement officers are both analysing the product and doing field trials," he says.

But for now The Specialty Group is focusing on Europe and North America.

"We've got very strong supply chains and a lot of customers there," he says.

In Australia, the company is aiming at safety.

"The safety workwear market will be a staple long-term industry," Mr Leipnik predicts. "We could literally see tens of millions of dollars in sales annually in the fabric alone. On the sportswear side I expect the same dollar value, but it may be a three- or four-year season fad for fashion."

Jill Soult, owner of Pure Hard Dance, which runs raves from Inflation Nightclub, agrees that glow items might be popular with ravers and surfers, but only for a limited time. "They love glowy light stuff but that's dying out pretty quickly," she says.