

## Virgin Blue polishes image with polymer coat



**Money saver:** Virgin Blue expects the polymer coating to lop millions of dollars off its costs

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VIRGIN Blue will cover its planes with an environmentally friendly liquid polymer designed to protect the exterior surface of the aircraft, cutting out the need to repaint or wash the aircraft.

Initial tests also suggest the slick, 10-micron covering may cut fuel consumption by several percentage points.

Virgin has signed a six-year agreement with the aviation division of Permagard Australia to treat 52 current and future Boeing 737s as well as its 20 new Embraer

E170 and E190 regional jets. It is the biggest contract so far won by Permagard, the Australasian licensee of the French-based Permagard Global Paint and Gel Coat protection system.

The airline said it chose the treatment after an extended testing program that showed the treatment to be long-lasting and to reduce the time needed to clean the planes.

The process completely seals the aircraft's outer surfaces, creating a permanent protective barrier.

First the surface of the paint is cleaned to remove dead paint and

contaminants, to restore its original colour.

A permanent "reactive" polymer coating is then applied to the fresh paint.

Once cured, it provides UV filtering and high resistance to water and corrosive substances.

"It hardens or cures over 24 hours and it's a permanent barrier between the environment and the aircraft paint," Permagard Aviation managing director Mark Pettitt said.

Mr Pettitt said it was then a case of servicing the coating rather than trying to cut and polish the paint, a process that

exposes it to oxidation and begins the degradation process.

Currently, Virgin Blue is required to wash each of the aircraft every 60 days but Mr Pettitt said that would no longer be necessary because of the surface treatment, designed to clean and reinforce the polymer coating.

He said there was evidence that contaminants were removed from the slick coating when it flew through rain.

"Our program eliminates the need to wash the planes, replacing this process with a reapplication of protective coating every 12 months," he said.

"Now that we have commenced a full six-year maintenance program on the current fleet and other aircraft still to join the airline, our objective is to implement a total waterless cleaning program for the Virgin Blue fleet."

Mr Pettitt was unable to go into specific numbers, but said the savings from not having to repaint the aircraft would run to "millions of dollars".

He said customers with business jets had been telling the company it could save fuel by using the coating, reporting savings of up to 4 per cent.