City assures residents that Page’s water supply is ‘in no way compromised’

The Lake Powell side of Glen Canyon Dam at elevation at 3,527 feet. Note the historic concrete mixing site to the right of the dam that recently surfaced after being submerged since the mid-1960s.

Page, Arizona, is not in danger of losing its water supply.

That’s the message from Page’s city manager after social media was abuzz last week with inaccurate rumors that the water supply in Page and nearby LeChee could soon be “cut off” because of falling water levels in Lake Powell.
In response to the rumors, Page’s Office of the City Manager released a statement on April 20 that said, “There recently has been what we consider half-truths when discussing the water concerns of Lake Powell, and the means by which Page is provided its water supply.”

“The City of Page would like to let all residents know that they have been collectively working with the Bureau of Reclamation to ensure that our water supply is in no way compromised,” the statement said. “The Bureau has provided an extensive plan for the guarantee of continued water supply, in case the situation becomes critical.”

Page Utility Enterprise will provide a formal update at the regular scheduled City Council meeting on Wednesday, April 27, at 5:30 p.m. “to explain the complexity of our water system.” The meeting can be viewed live at cityofpage.org by clicking the City of Page YouTube Channel link.

The inaccurate rumors about the demise of Page’s water supply stemmed from a widely circulated article on the 12 News website from April 18 that said, “If Lake Powell's levels continue to fall … access to drinking water would be cut off for the 7,500 residents of Page, at the southwestern tip of the reservoir, and the neighboring Navajo community of LeChee.”

This came the day after 12 News aired an interview on its
weekly “Sunday Square Off” show with Tom Buschatzke, Arizona’s director of water resources.

Earlier this month, Buschatzke received a letter from the U.S. Department of the Interior with dire warnings that “we are approaching operating conditions for which we have only very limited actual operating experience – and which occurred nearly 60 years ago. We hope to be able to delay or avoid operational conditions below the critical elevations (3,490 feet) … but we fully realize that absent a change in the recent hydrological conditions, we may not be able to avoid such operations.”

The letter went on the say that if Lake Powell declined below 3,490 feet, “we have recently confirmed that essential drinking water infrastructure supplying the City of Page, Arizona, and the LeChee Chapter of the Navajo Nation could not function.”

The letter asked its recipients – who also included governor’s representatives in Utah, New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado, California and Wyoming – to consider potentially reducing releases from Glen Canyon Dam to Lake Mead to 7 million acre-feet this water year, which ends in September, and “providing addition certainty regarding annual release volumes and tier determination for the 2023 water year.”

The letter also asked recipients to respond with feedback or
recommendations on or before April 22.

In the “Sunday Square Off” interview, Buschatzke said water supply in Arizona was becoming a “health and safety issue” for those who want to turn on their taps and have flowing water.

“In the next couple of years, we’re not really in danger of having to shut off the taps at home, but the levels of the lakes are such that it could become difficult to move the water past the dams the way the infrastructure is designed,” he said.

“If we do not take any action, that could happen as soon as 2023, with maybe the impacts really being felt in a couple years past that, 2024 or 2025,” he said, adding that Page, in particular, faced “an infrastructure issue.”

“If you cannot move water through the power generators at Lake Powell, you might not be able to get water to Page, and Page provides water to the LeChee Chapter of the Navajo Nation as well,” Buschatzke said.

In an interview with Lake Powell Chronicle last month, Page Mayor Bill Diak spoke in detail about the steps the city was taking to implement another straw to draw water from Lake Powell for the City of Page.

Currently, Page gets its water from a 12-inch pipe that was
installed at the base of the Glen Canyon Dam during its construction in the 1960s. In 2004, the Bureau of Reclamation conducted a survey of the dam, which concluded that the pipe through the dam was nearing the end of its life.

“At that time, we started looking at other avenues for a second straw,” Diak said. “The bureau said that because of the age of the infrastructure of the dam, they will not upgrade the pipe. It will be abandoned. When it fails, it will be done. So, we need a completely new system separate from the dam.”

The city is seeking federal funding to implement that new system, which is estimated to cost between $40-55 million. Toward that end, the city has been lobbying Arizona’s congressional leaders – Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, Sen. Mark Kelly and Rep. Tom O’Halleran – to make sure Page is on everyone’s radar when funding is allocated from the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which was signed into law last November.