

Carlson names legislator to state's top

By James Walsh
Staff Writer

Mankato, Minn.



Gene Hugoson

30, state Rep. Gene Hugoson exudes more Wall Street than back 40.

Hugoson, 49, promises to emphasize international trade, a more competitive business climate and new technology. If that sounds bigger than corn, soybeans and monthly milk checks, it's no accident. It's how Minnesota agriculture will survive,

he said.

"There's no doubt about it: Agriculture is changing," said Hugoson, who farms near East Chain in Martin County. "We can either watch the change happen and bemoan some of the things we see, or we can be a part of it."

Carlson said he wants a different focus. "We are in a world market. Minnesota farmers are competing in a world market. I think we can win big in international trade, and the commissioner of agriculture is really the one to coordinate that."

Hugoson looks the part. Described as perhaps the best-tailored rural representative in the Legislature, the five-term House Independent-Republican looks as comfortable in a boardroom as in a hog barn. He says his generation of farmers may be the first to look at farming as more of a business than a way of life.

"These are guys with computers and

spreadsheets and five-year plans," he said. "People who subscribe to the Wall Street Journal. It's a whole different lifestyle."

While Hugoson said he wants to see all kinds of Minnesota farms and agricultural operations coexist, he makes it clear that for Minnesota to move ahead, bigger farms and lower costs must become more commonplace.

He said he would like to fine-tune the state's corporate farm law, allowing dairy farmers to pool resources and band together in joint operations in the same way other livestock producers were mobilized by changes in the law last year.

Doesn't that raise the specter of dozens of megadairies across the state? "That could happen. We could continue to have small farms, too," he said. "But the third alternative is that we're not going to have any dairy industry at all."

Hugoson said he wants a closer partnership between his department and the University of Minnesota to help promote the use of animal and plant technology to make farmers more competitive with larger operations in other states. And he plans to look for ways to promote the development of new agricultural industries.

Hugoson said he plans to start work before taking his new post July 1. He said he will continue to serve in the Legislature for the remainder of the session, but will convene a task force to mull ways to make Minnesota producers global players.

That direction will almost certainly lead to a larger-scale, big-bucks, balance-sheet orientation that some may not like, Hugoson admitted. But modern agriculture is not a Grant Wood painting nor images of kittens and kids at play in a pasture, he said, calling those conceptions city folks' stereotype of grandpa's farm.

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Gene Hugoson

Occupation/ Farmer, state legislator

Age/ 49

Birthplace/ Martin County

Residence/ Granada

Family/ Wife, Patricia; son, Jon.

Education/ Graduate of Augsburg College; graduate work at Mankato State University.

Work experience/ After growing up on the family farm and attending college, Hugoson served with the Army in Vietnam and taught high-school social studies in Lakefield and St. James. He now farms 750 acres of corn and soybeans and has been involved in a family operation with his father and brother, who raises hogs. He is serving his fifth term in the state House of Representatives.

Awards and distinctions/ He is a life member of the American Legion and VFW. First elected to the House in 1986, he previously served four years as assistant minority leader.

culture's transition to large operations. "It's going to have to happen. Do I like it? No. Do I want to make it happen? No. But we can't put the

brakes on it. And we have to find a way to allow Minnesota agriculture to compete and succeed in that arena."