The Senate has produced a small victory against expansion of the nation's sometimes disastrous experiments with electricity deregulation. But the prospects remain difficult for fending off the attempts to turn consumers' basic electrical service into a corporate plaything.

Last week, Senate negotiators called off their work on an energy bill. That effectively put aside until next year any congressional decision to deregulate the whole country's energy markets.

It was a modest victory for Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., and others who have been trying to stop the deregulation scheme. For now, they have stopped plans to give the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission almost blanket authority to impose deregulation on all the states. But the proposal will be back next year.

And, even without legislation, FERC is relentlessly trying to push its agenda ahead by rule-making.

Deregulation is a recipe for trouble. The after-effects of California's experiment continue to mean that thousands of customers in the West can't even pay their electricity bills.

In holding off action, a coalition of states, largely from the West and the Southeast, warned about the clear dangers to consumers posed by FERC's unbending ideological commitment to deregulation. Many of the opponents in the Senate are Western Republicans who understand that FERC's deregulation proposals don't contain any assurance of preventing another market meltdown.

In the White House, however, President Bush apparently is clinging to his belief in deregulation. The leading Senate Democratic negotiator said that the administration seems to want to try again next year to win passage of an energy bill that will support the energy regulatory commission's plans.

FERC is convinced that it can impose deregulation without creating economic trouble. But FERC still hasn't sorted out what happened in the Western energy crisis nearly two years later.

The commission asserts that it is listening to public concerns. But the latest revelation about the Western energy crisis suggests just how little information FERC has given people.

On Friday, The Wall Street Journal reported new evidence that the corporate manipulation of power supplies in California began before the energy crisis. Indeed, FERC staff members wrote a report that includes excerpts of telephone discussions between two major energy companies about keeping a California electric plant out of commission. But the agency withheld the report until the Journal won a legal judgment making the document public.
Even without an energy bill, the energy commission and its chairman, Pat Wood III, who was recommended for his job by an Enron executive, hopes to enact rules requiring deregulation schemes across the country. As attorneys general from the Western states have argued, that's a reversal of U.S. practice, and is potentially illegal.

There's a good way to head off a court fight, though. That would be for Congress to write sensible energy legislation that protects the public from any more deregulation schemes, at least until we understand what went so terribly wrong in the West.

But deregulation advocates have the ear of the White House. So the next battle will be to hold off renewed attempts to push deregulation through Congress next year.