WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Monday unanimously rejected a lawsuit that had sought to force major electric utilities to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions without waiting for federal regulators to act.

The suit was brought by six states, New York City and several land trusts. Its central contention was that carbon dioxide emissions from power plants belonging to four private companies and the Tennessee Valley Authority amounted to a public nuisance under federal common law. The suit asked a federal court in New York to order the defendants to reduce their emissions.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, writing for the court, said the plaintiffs were making their case in the wrong forum. Under the Clean Air Act, she wrote, the matter must be addressed by the Environmental Protection Agency rather than by the courts.

The court's ruling on the one hand reaffirmed that the federal environmental agency has the tools to address emissions of carbon dioxide. On the other hand, it limited the options of environmental advocates who have been pressing the agency to move faster in the face of considerable resistance in Congress.

The lawsuit was filed in 2004 against a different regulatory backdrop. In those days, the Bush administration argued that the Clean Air Act did not permit the agency to issue regulations addressing climate change, and that it would be unwise to do so in any event.

The AES power plant in Huntington Beach, Calif. The state was one of six involved in the case.

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But in 2007, the Supreme Court ruled that the law did authorize federal regulations on greenhouse gas emissions, and that the agency was required to issue them unless it had a scientific basis for its refusal.

After that decision and the change in administrations, the agency has begun to issue greenhouse gas regulations, starting with rules covering automobiles. It is working on more, including one that would set limits on power plants that burn fossil fuels like coal or natural gas.

It followed, Justice Ginsburg wrote, that the agency rather than the courts should take the leading role in considering limits on power plant emissions, although the agency’s action or inaction would remain subject to judicial review.

Originally, eight states — California, Connecticut, Iowa, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont and Wisconsin — filed the suit, but New Jersey and Wisconsin later dropped out.

The states and their allies asked the courts to protect them from what they called a public nuisance: the many unwanted consequences of global climate change caused by heat-trapping pollutants. The defendants, they said, were collectively responsible for 25 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions from domestic power plants, and 10 percent of emissions from all human activity in the United States.

Judge Loretta A. Preska of Federal District Court in Manhattan dismissed the suit, saying the “balancing of economic, environmental, foreign policy and national security interests involved” was a task “consigned to the political branches, not the judiciary.” But her ruling was reversed more than three years later on appeal, when a two-judge panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, in New York, allowed the case to proceed.

The court did not disclose the justices’ votes on that point. Summarizing the decision from the bench on Monday, Justice Ginsburg explained the court’s “standard practice” in such circumstances: “We affirm the court of appeals’ exercise of jurisdiction, but we issue no opinion on the point and our disposition of the question carries no weight as precedent.”

Nonetheless, a passage in another part of the decision indicated concerns similar to those expressed by Judge Preska.

“The expert agency is surely better equipped to do the job than individual district judges issuing ad hoc, case-by-case injunctions,” Justice Ginsburg wrote. “Federal judges lack the scientific, economic and technological resources an agency can utilize in coping with issues of this order.”

The justices also took no position on the science of climate change.

“The court, we caution, endorses no particular view of the complicated issues related to carbon dioxide emissions and climate change,” Justice Ginsburg wrote in her decision in the case, American Electric Power v. Connecticut, No. 10-174.

Nor did the court address whether a nuisance suit over carbon dioxide emissions would be proper but for the Clean Air Act’s grant of authority to the federal environmental agency. All the court decided, Justice Ginsburg wrote, was that “any such claim would be displaced by the federal legislation authorizing E.P.A. to regulate carbon dioxide emissions.”

The Clean Air Act, she wrote, “provides a means to seek limits on emissions of carbon dioxide from domestic power plants — the same relief the plaintiffs seek by invoking federal common law,” adding: “We see no room for a parallel track.”